

**TEXT IS CROSS IN
THE BOOK**

E797-2

Estes 52.50
Long Week Ind.

E 797-2

Keep Your Card in This Pocket

Books will be issued only on presentation of proper library cards.

Unless labeled otherwise, books may be retained for two weeks. Borrowers finding books marked, defaced or mutilated are expected to report same at library desk; otherwise the last borrower will be held responsible for all imperfections discovered.

The card holder is responsible for all books drawn on this card.

Penalty for over-due books 2c a day plus cost of notices.

Lost cards and change of residence must be reported promptly.



Public Library
Kansas City, Mo.

Keep Your Card in This Pocket

BERKOWITZ ENVELOPE CO., K. C., MO.

KANSAS CITY MO PUBLIC LIBRARY

0 0001 0310129 1

570 07113 1041 113

DEC 5 '48

OCT 4 '48

MAR 3 '48

APR 21 '48

MAY 14 '48

JUN 30 '48

SEP 28 '48

DEC 13 '48

FEB 11 '49

APR 28 '49

NOV 1 '49

DEC 6 '49

JAN 26 '50

LONG WEEK END



By HARLOW ESTES



HILDRETH

THE \$10,000.00 PRIZE NOVEL

LONG WEEK END

By

HARLOW ESTES

New York

DODD, MEAD & COMPANY

1941

COPYRIGHT, 1941
By DODD, MEAD AND COMPANY, INC.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED
NO PART OF THIS BOOK MAY BE REPRODUCED IN ANY FORM
WITHOUT PERMISSION IN WRITING FROM THE PUBLISHER

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
BY THE VAIL-BALLOU PRESS, INC., BINGHAMTON, N. Y.

LONG WEEK END



1

Now, Livy, she cautioned herself, hold everything, you crazy fool. It's not settled yet.

But it would be. She knew in her bones that before Monday morning it would be settled, one way or another, between Ames and herself. No, not one way or another. One way, only. The way she wanted it to be. He must want it, too, or he wouldn't have phoned her last night, would he? And she wouldn't be on her way to him now.

By Monday morning it would be settled and this glorious excitement inside her would be justified and would continue for the rest of her life. But she really must hold hard this minute, or the glory expanding inside her would burst through her skin and through the seams of her new red suit and through the windows of the day coach and send the whole train off the track into one of those bluet-starred meadows.

I hold everything, Livy. I've had it twice before, she reminded herself, and it came to nothing. Nothing, at least, that I could hold onto forever. Four years ago and eight years ago. That's how long it takes me to get over it each time. I can't, I won't, I daren't miss out again. I may never feel like this again. But what can go wrong? It isn't like four years ago; he hasn't already got a wife. It certainly isn't like the sorry mess I made of things with Carl; I didn't

know then what I wanted; who does at twenty? Well, he did. He knew from the time he was six.

She leaned back, shutting her eyes. She was on her way to Ames. It was not the time to be thinking about Carl Brittain. But there he was in her mind, a grave little boy cutting the tonsils out of a neighbor child's rag doll with a kitchen knife. She hadn't known him when he was six, but there he was, clear in her mind.

It's because he used to live here, she thought, somewhere in this part of the state, some tiny four corners with a name I can't remember. The last time I saw him he was on his way to it. A name out of Shakespeare. If I could think of the name, I might be able to stop thinking of him, because he isn't here now, of course. He's in some big city where there's a whopping big hospital. He always said he wouldn't touch general small town practice with the tongs. He was haughty about it.

Capulet. Montague. Venice. Verona. I'll have to ask Ames, and he'll ask, "Why?" and I'll say, "Oh, nothing," and feel like a fool.

The train was slowing down. She sat up with a jerk. It couldn't be four o'clock already. She glanced at her wrist but her watch had stopped before breakfast. She had worn it into her bath. The prospect of seeing him again had made her that dizzy. The hours of the journey had stretched ahead endlessly then, and now where were they? The train was slowing down.

Through the window she saw him waiting on the platform, his eyes searching for her, his dark brown hair shining and very neat, his face a little browner than when she had seen it last. Six weeks browner. In a panic of haste she slapped on her hat, dragged her battered old suitcase from the rack overhead, and tore down the aisle. She landed on

the platform in a great leap, crying: "Oh, Ames! Oh, darling, how marvelous to see you again!"

She hadn't meant to bellow it, but sometimes, in jubilant excitement, her voice got away from her.

He said with restraint, "So you made it. Good girl," and held his hand out. To ward her off? She had been all ready to fling her arms around his neck. Six weeks apart, and shaking hands like strangers; as if she were just anyone, any week end guest. His handclasp was perfunctory, his pleasant smile a little fixed. She stared at him, baffled.

"You look different, Ames."

She said that instead of, "You are different," because she wouldn't and didn't believe he had changed in six weeks except to be browner.

"You look younger."

And smaller. More boyish. He wasn't small. He wasn't a boy. He was a good year older than she and half an inch taller, she happened to know. But in the sunlight, bare-headed, in that tight black sweater, in gray slacks and crepe-soled brown shoes, with that fixed self-conscious smile on his face, he looked like a neat and slender schoolboy sent to the station to meet some friend of his mother's. Polite, but uneasy, and very much on his guard.

On his guard. Against her?

"Ames, you're not glad to see me. You're sorry you asked me."

The direct appeal or assault was her best method. It didn't always work, but what did? She had experimented with subtlety a few times; she wouldn't again, ever; the results had been frightful.

He said, "I didn't really think you'd make it. I was afraid you couldn't get the time off on such short notice, or that you'd miss the train; there isn't another till midnight."

So that's what he'd thought.

"I never lose trains," she said.

Other things, yes. My head. My peace of mind. My hope of happiness. Yes, and jobs. I threw over my job to come to you. I don't believe I'll tell you that. You might think it silly and reckless. But there are plenty of jobs, and only one of you. I've walked out of good jobs before and found better ones elsewhere. But I may not be in love like this again.

He picked up her suitcase and she realized suddenly that it was disreputable. Her clothes were wonderful but her bag was an old horror. She ought to have invested in a glossy new one. But even if she had thought of it, there hadn't been time.

"Go easy with that, darling. The lock's unreliable. Last fall I strewed dirty linen all over Fifth Avenue, coming back on a Sunday evening from a country week end, and wash day isn't till Monday, you know. Most embarrassing."

He could have switched it to his other hand. He could have put a companionable arm across her shoulders and walked her along beside him to where the car was parked. He could have, if he had wanted to have her close to him. Apparently he preferred to keep his distance. The suitcase swung between them.

"Speaking," he said, "of going easy," and shoved the bag into the back of the car and opened the door to the front for her, "go easy with my mother, will you, Livy?"

He had a mother extant; they lived together; but that was all she knew.

"How do you mean? What's wrong with her, Ames?"

"Nothing is. But try to remember that she's sixty-nine and has led a protected life, or perhaps you'd call it narrow, the whole of it spent right here in Hotchkiss and Padua."

"Padua!" she said.

So that was it. Out of Shakespeare. Not Montague or Capulet. Not tragedy but comedy. A shrew was tamed in Padua or thereabouts. And I'm no shrew.

"It's the next town to this."

"How near?"

"Seventeen miles. It used to be quite a village in Mother's time; she was born there and lived right there until she married. It had a church and school of its own, and mills, but the mills shut down, and later they burned, and the church burned, and now it's only a ghost village; a few old people, a general store, a few artists in summer."

He isn't there. I can forget about him. The old lady who gave him a home and paid for his medical training must be dead by now. I wonder if Ames' mother knew her. Her name wasn't Brittain. She owned the mills. They shut down and later they burned.

"It hasn't even a school of its own?"

"No, the children come here."

But he didn't. I'm thankful he didn't go to school with you. Did you know him, I wonder?

She wanted to ask, "Do you know a Dr. Carl Brittain, a surgeon, who grew up in Padua?" But suppose Ames said, "Yes." What then? She couldn't discuss Carl with Ames, of all people.

She said quickly and lightly, "I hadn't supposed your mother was so old. Mine wasn't yet fifty when she died last October. Yours had you late, didn't she? At forty. Were you an afterthought or just a mistake?"

"She was married fourteen years before she had us. She wanted children more than anything and when she'd given up hope she had three of us close together. She's sweet, Livy. You'll like her and she'll like you, if you'll just go easy with her and bear in mind that she's nearly seventy and a semi-

invalid and she gets upset rather easily."

"Do you mean she's a little bit senile, Ames?"

"Of course she isn't senile!" he snapped.

"Well, she could be. It could be premature."

She scrambled in beside him and banged the car door shut. No need for him to glower like that. He was half turned toward her, his arm lying along the back of the seat, and he could have taken her into his arms without moving far, but he wasn't touching her by so much as a finger tip. What was wrong with him? She wasn't poison, was she? Six weeks ago he had seemed to enjoy kissing her.

His dark brown eyes looked past her, clear and steady, telling her nothing helpful. He wasn't actually scowling but he wasn't friendly. There was something about the set of his mouth, something about his straight dark eyebrows and his forehead, that oppressed her. Why didn't he burst out and say what was wrong instead of being so damned polite and hostile behind the politeness?

"Just be a little careful, that's all I ask, Livy. Be nice to her but not too nice. I mean, don't treat her as if she were a thousand years old. She's somewhat lame; she has arthritis; but she isn't crippled, so don't try to help her up out of chairs; it's all right for us to; she doesn't mind us; but it would hurt her feelings for you to notice. The thing she's most afraid of in life, what's left of her life, is being a nuisance and a burden to us."

Livy took her hat off and threw it into the back seat. She pushed the heavy curls back from her neck. Her head was getting hot but in her stomach was a clammy lump of nervousness. The lovely bursting happiness was gone.

"I'll be careful. Pete's sake. I want to make a good first impression as much as you can possibly want me to."

"I'm sure you do," he glanced at her, quickly, a little rue-

fully, she thought, and away again. "You will, too, if you can just hang onto yourself and not be too vehement."

"Vehement?" she was astonished. "I'm not vehement. I'm as gentle as a dove. You ought to see Hank in action. My brother. Did I say I had a brother? He smashes things when he gets excited. A whole dozen cocktail glasses, once; not all at once, but one right after another against the wall. He wasn't drunk, either; just exasperated. And once he threw a chair out of a window, right through the glass. I never do things like that. I never smash anything except by accident."

Ames nodded.

"I just hope you're not accident prone, that's all," he said.

The cold lump in her stomach moved sickeningly. "

If he feels so doubtful about me, she thought, why did he invite me here for the week end? Maybe he called up on impulse and has been regretting it ever since. Maybe he thought I wouldn't accept. Maybe I shouldn't have. It's too soon. We've seen each other only twice. I should have held off and made him come to me. I shouldn't have agreed to visit his mother till things were definite, and then what she thought of me couldn't have mattered.

"Ames, I shouldn't have come. When's the next train out?"

His fingers clamped on her wrist.

"You're here and you're going to see it through, my girl. You're going to stay till the eight o'clock train Monday morning. This is one time you don't just walk out when you feel inclined."

"Why, Ames," she said, "if you want me to stay, it's what I want, too, more than anything."

If you want me, darling, I don't care about your mother or anything. Only don't be strange and aloof with me. When you're worried, tell me what about. Don't shut me away

from you.

"I can behave beautifully when I make an effort and when it's worth an effort. Will your mother like me if I behave beautifully?"

Or won't she?

Maybe she hates me already, on general principles, simply because you're interested in me. I suppose that makes her my natural enemy. Maybe she's sitting at home this minute with a knife up her sleeve, waiting to slit my jugular.

"She will, Livy. She wants to. And you'll like her. She's sweet."

Don't keep saying that. I distrust sweet people. Some sugar pills taste foul when you bite through the outside coating.

"All she wants is for the rest of us to be comfortable and happy. She finished with her own life when Dad died."

Oh, she did. So now she wants to live your life. How nice.

"She asks nothing for herself but to see us and hear about what we're doing and know that we're contented. She's the most unselfish person alive."

Now, stop. Stop right there. You're piling it on too thick. You're making me hate her before I've even seen her.

"I distrust unselfishness, Ames. It goes against nature. What looks like it usually turns out to be pose or perversion."

"Livy!"

He was scandalized. It annoyed her that he could be scandalized. She said: "I mean it. I've seen it. I had a sister-in-law who was sweet enough to make you gag, unselfish as all get out; everybody thought all she lacked was a harp. I tell, she was one. And the other thing, the authentic martyrdom

business, can be just as bad; an everlasting sweat to give up and go without and be a human sacrifice when there's no need for it and nobody wants it. It's a damned nuisance as well as being a perversion."

"Livy, listen," he said desperately, "that's exactly what I'm afraid of. Talk like that before Mother. She'll have a stroke."

All right, let her, thought Livy.

It was going to be a horrible week end. It was going to be an ordeal instead of a delight. She was thoroughly wretched because now she was certain that whatever went wrong he would blame it on her.

Disconsolately she stared along the road that led into Hotchkiss. It was lined with young elms, slender-trunked sherry-glass elms, their leaves yellow-green in the sun. Only this morning she had exulted because the sun was out and the paper promised more sunshine after a succession of dreary spring week ends sodden with rain.

A lovely day. A lovely time of year. Everything green and clean before the dust of broad summer. Even the sky was clean, a bright washed blue without a fleck of cloud.

"All right," she said bitterly. "I'll be careful. I'll talk about the weather and nothing else. But if I have any accidents, you can thank yourself. You've made me nervous and nervousness makes accidents. I jumped off the train feeling wonderful, ready to burst with happiness, and now I've got a repulsive cold small lump in my stomach as if I'd swallowed a toad. It won't make a good first impression on your mother if I open my mouth to say, 'How do you do, Mrs. Chelsea,' and a toad hops out into her face."

He said, "Why, Livy. Why, darling."

She wouldn't turn her face to look at him, but his voice

made her heart stumble because it was warm and amused, the way it had been six weeks ago. Not aloof any more. Not strained.

He said, "Why, darling Livy, I didn't mean to make you uneasy. I honestly didn't suppose you had any nerves."

He took hold of her earlobe and turned her face around to kiss her mouth. He kissed her the way she had wanted to be kissed when she leaped from the train.

"Oh, Ames, Ames, why didn't you do that before?"

The wool of his black sweater was scratchy against her cheek. It was wonderful. She rubbed her face against it.

"Shaking hands with me as if I were just anyone. As if I were a visiting fireman."

He laughed.

"A visiting fire engine in that suit and hat."

She tipped her head back.

"You like red, don't you?"

"No," he said.

She didn't really mind. She couldn't expect him to like every little thing she happened to like. But it was rather a pity, since she hadn't brought much else to wear. A gingham shirt and shorts, and those were red. A black dinner dress, but she couldn't wear that in the daytime.

"I had thought most men liked red. It's Pa's favorite color, and Hank's. It's a cheerful color. It puts heart into me when I'm depressed, and when I feel like celebrating it helps. I always have something red, a hat or gloves or a bag. Perhaps a whole suit of it is too much; there's so much of me. But it was such a dismal gray spring that I needed anything I could get to keep up my courage."

A dismal spring, six weeks without a sight of you and not a line from you or even a phone call until last night.

"Did you think about me these six weeks, Ames?"

He said, "I thought plenty."

He gave her a little push away, but a friendly push, and started the car.

"Drive slowly," she said. She was happy again, not the way she had been on the train, but happy. "I want to see everything."

There was a road that cut across and went northeast. There was a signpost with block letters in faded white paint, several names but all she had time to read was the top one, Padua, 17 mi. But even if I'd known how near it was, even if it had been marked on the map I looked at last night, she thought, I would have come just the same. I had to come.

"Hotchkiss isn't much of a place, you know," said Ames. "You wouldn't miss much if you drove through with your eyes shut."

"I thought you liked your town."

"I do," he said. "It's my town so I like it. But that doesn't mean that you will. It isn't much."

"It's as much as Littlefield, New York, where I lived and had my being for eighteen years," said Livy. "I've lived in other larger places the last ten years, but until I finished high school I thought Littlefield was the center of the universe. Then, of course, I couldn't get away fast enough."

"Why of course?"

"Because I was eighteen. Didn't you have a terrific urge to get away from Hotchkiss at about that age?"

"I did get away for four years."

"Oh, you mean college. But that doesn't count. You kept coming back for summers and holidays and week ends, didn't you? Your roots were still here."

"I like having roots," he said.

"Naturally you like it at twenty-nine. But when you had to come back here after college, weren't you restless? Didn't

you long to go off, entirely on your own, to some strange new place where nobody knew you, where people couldn't remind you of what you were like in your pram? Didn't you feel it was an anticlimax just to settle tamely down in your father's business?"

"Oh, I had a vague idea of going into the newspaper game," he said, "and I looked around a little, but the competition was terrific and I was glad to come home and go into the Press. It's a good enough living. I like it."

She said, "Show me the Press."

"Not now. There isn't time. Mother's expecting us."

"Just the outside, I mean. Can't we drive past it?"

"We are. That's it. Magnificent, isn't it?"

"You don't have to be sarcastic, Amies. It looks tremendous to me. You ought to see Pa's law office; just a couple of dingy rooms over the Fenimore brothers' grocery store."

He said rapidly, "You are now seeing the business center of Hotchkiss. The Chelsea Press, the hardware store, the meat market, our one hotel, Dakin's dresses for ladies, and here we turn. That mass of stone is the Baptist Church. You a Baptist? Neither are we. That stucco building is the doctor's office. He lives behind it. His wife is cross-eyed. His nurse is a great buddy of my sister's. They run the Red Cross together."

"What's his name?" she held her breath till he said, "Cheney. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Is he the only doctor in Hotchkiss?"

"The only good one. Young Davidson may know his scalpels but most of the time he's pickled. Dr. Cheney is the one we all depend on. He brought most of us into the world. Now that grim-looking ark with a wide veranda is the Hotchkiss Women's Club, of which my sister Celeste is president. She's bossing a benefit dance there tomorrow

night and I'm afraid we'll have to go. Do you think you can bear it?"

"Why not? I love to dance. Don't you?"

How funny to be so much in love with a man and not even know whether he liked to dance or whether he had an aversion to fried potatoes or whether he liked a fat pillow to sleep on at night. She slept with no pillow at all and she loved fried potatoes. Well, she'd learned one thing already; he didn't like red. If they married, she would have plenty of time to discover his likes and dislikes.

"I dance badly," he said. "I shall step on your feet."

He pointed.

"Our new high school building. Impressive, isn't it? Celeste had the old one condemned; it was a fire trap; she forced through the bonds for this one. She is a good executive, I'll say that for her. That's the Congregational Church. Yes, so are we."

"I like your town," said Livy. "I feel at home in it. I had forgotten how good a small town feels. The wide streets and no traffic to speak of, the houses with plenty of space between, the lawns and the big old trees. I can almost smell yeast rolls baking. It's just like Littlefield."

"The town you couldn't get away from fast enough."

He shouldn't use what she said against her. He shouldn't deliberately misunderstand. He liked Hotchkiss himself yet he had a chip on his shoulder about it, expecting her not to.

"But, Ames, I told you, till I was eighteen I loved my town. I had a fine time growing up. I knew everybody in Littlefield; I was part of everything that went on, or thought I was. It wasn't until my last year in high school that I began to be restless. Hank was away at Tech; he's a year older than I am; and I missed him; and my friends were all planning to

go away to college or to work or to marry, and home wasn't too comfortable; I began to have mother trouble; with Hank away, she concentrated on me. I wanted to make a real break and go west to college, but she wouldn't have it. She thought I needed supervision. I was stuck in a little college, for women only, two hours from home, with lots of rules and regulations and academic ideals and good clean girlish fun. I all but died of it. The middle of the second term I just walked out."

"Without warning?" asked Ames. "Without permission?"

"Without even a note on the pincushion. I took a bus to the next town and got myself a job in the five and dime. Then I sent a postcard home. Pa came for me. He was terribly nice about it. He stood up for me. Mother thought I had disgraced myself, and the college was outraged. But Pa gave me the price of a college year in one lump sum and told me to go and try my strength farther off from home. He said if I was homesick or broke I'd know what to do. But I never did have to go home. I got along all right. I loved being on my own."

"You were fortunate," said Ames stiffly. "Most of us don't have such tolerant fathers or such complete freedom from responsibility."

She turned to him in distress. His profile was forbidding. What had she said to make him hostile again? Did he resent the freedom she had had? She hadn't meant to brag about it. She hadn't thought her marching out of college a smart trick. It had been a desperate necessity.

He was turning the car into a narrow gravel driveway.

"Are we here? Is this your house, Ames?"

"This is it," he said.

Perhaps that was why he had stiffened up. She clutched eagerly at that explanation. He was dreading the meeting

between his mother and her.

She thought, Oh, darling, don't worry, I'll be nice to her. But she may not let me. She may hate me already. She's had you for twenty-nine years. She may hate giving you up to me. She may be sitting behind one of those small-paned windows this minute, concealed by one of those ruffled white curtains, watching and waiting for me with a knife in her sleeve.

"It's a charming house, Ames."

But so tidy. Do you trim the lawn with manicure scissors? Do you wash the white paint with soapsuds every Saturday? But of course a white house stays white longer in a small town like this. No industrial smoke.

"It looks new."

"It is new," he said. "I built it three years ago, after Dad died. Our old house is back of this, at the other end of the property, facing the next street. Dad used to own this whole block but when business slumped he sold off most of his land to keep the Press going. The best of the maples and beeches are on this strip. You'll see the old house later. Mother couldn't bear to go on living in it without Dad, and it was too big for us; it's very tall and narrow, with immensely high ceilings and long staircases, and Mother isn't supposed to climb stairs much; she has a knee that gives out and she had two bad falls before we moved over here. I wanted to put up a bungalow but she couldn't bear the idea of sleeping on the ground floor, so now we've arranged for her to stay upstairs till lunch time and once she's downstairs she stays down till it's time for bed. That gives Gracia a chance to come and go without worrying about Mother breaking a hip. Not that Gracia cares much about gadding. She's not like Celeste, on the run all the time. You'll like Gracia. I don't know what I'd do without her."

He had said the same thing about his mother. "You'll like her." And she hadn't believed it. But when he said it now, of Gracia, she believed it at once.

"She's your other sister, Ames?"

"Yes. The one who lives at home with us."

His favorite sister. That was what his tone said. The sister he was close to. He hadn't referred to Celeste in that kind warm voice.

"I know I shall like her. I'm sure of it. It's a hunch, and my hunches are nearly always right."

He looked pleased, and she thought, It's going to be easy to like Gracia. I'm grateful to her just for existing, for being here, for not being married. I thought he lived alone with Mrs. Chelsea. Oh, Gracia simplifies everything. If Mrs. Chelsea has an unmarried daughter to cling to, she can't keep Ames from marrying. If she has to live somebody else's life, let her live Gracia's. Then Ames can live his own, with me.

"Come in and meet her," said Ames, and lifted the suitcase out.

The lawn was springy and soft under her shoes. The late afternoon sunlight was comforting on her back.

"Oh, this is lovely. I haven't had a bit of sun all spring. I want to get a good sun bath this week end. I'm terribly glad to be here with you, darling. It's going to be fun, having time to get acquainted."

"Acquainted with my family?"

"No. With you. We didn't have time, those two evenings. We talked a lot but what about? About the Press and my job and the war. We really know nothing personal about each other."

Except that we love each other. You do love me, don't you?

"Come along," he said.

This time he carried the suitcase in his other hand and walked her along to the door beside him, his arm across her shoulders as if he liked having her close. The door stood open and through the screen she saw a tiny hall papered in yellow and a flight of shallow stairs carpeted in blue. He called, "Mother? Gracia? Where are you? Here's Livy."

She heard a quick light step. He smiled and put out a welcoming hand, but not to her. He said, "Here she is, Gracia. This is Livy."

The week end had begun.

2

GRACIA CHELSEA took in the stranger with one quick look and thought, Not this one. Never, never this one. He'll never marry her. I wish I'd known. I wouldn't have lost my night's sleep.

She said, "Would you like to go up at once and see where you're to sleep? I hope Ames warned you that the house isn't large and our single guest room is occupied by Howes, so you're to share my room, if you don't mind too much."

It was easy to be friendly, even gay, now that she had seen the girl and could stop worrying. The relief was blissful after the hours of uncertainty.

"Rich and Serena Howes are family," Ames explained. "They're down for the dance. They always stay with us. Celeste has more room, but her mattresses are the very best hair, just like the floor, and her cook isn't a patch on ours, and Rich Howes loves his food. Do you mind not having a room to yourself, Livy?"

"Of course I don't," her voice seemed to fill the house. It wasn't actually loud but it was rich and round and hearty. "I can sleep anywhere any time. I'm used to doubling up. I share an apartment with two other girls, and at a pinch I've slept four in a bed. It was a pinch, too. We had to lie across with a row of chairs for the feet. But I slept all right."

Gracia shuddered. She was a bad sleeper at the best of

times. But tonight she would sleep, she was sure, just from relief, even with this girl in the room.

The tiny hall seemed to be filled with Livy. She wasn't huge; no taller than Ames, and not thick; tall for a girl, and broad-shouldered but flat-hipped and fairly rangy. It wasn't her size alone that was so overwhelming; it was her heartiness, her positive voice, her sublime self-confidence; and all that bright eye-catching red; the suit, the wide red circle of hat that didn't quite match the suit, the quantity of vivid lipstick that didn't quite match either suit or hat. Far too much lipstick, recently applied and not too well; smeared just a little at the left side of her full soft lower lip. Her mouth was big and beautiful, but Gracia thought of the damask napkins with despair, and of Ames with bewilderment.

He doesn't like carelessly put on make-up, she thought. He doesn't like bright red. He doesn't like big, hearty, breezy women. At least, he never has before. What possessed him to ask her here?

She thought, Rufus would have taken to her at sight. But not Ames. Never Ames.

"Where's Mother, Gracia?"

"In the kitchen trying to quiet Mrs. Prout. If we don't get any meals this week end, you can blame the government. You can blame the army. You can blame the war. Benjy's enlisted."

He said, "That's fine. He told me he wanted to."

"It's fine for Benjy," she said, "but not for us. His grandmother is fit to be tied, and she'll take it out on us. You know she will. She wouldn't mind quite so much if you'd been called at the same time. She knew Charles wouldn't be, with his young dependents, and Rich is out because of his eyes, of course, but she's furious about you. She's going

to write to the President."

He laughed.

"In case you're tangled, Livy, let me explain that Mrs. Prout, who's cooked for us since before I was born, has a daughter Roselle who cooks for Celeste, and Roselle has a son just my age. Mrs. Prout is a bully. She picked out a husband for Roselle and then bullied him till he deserted, and she's brought up Benjy because Roselle has always lived where she worked. It's taken a war to set Benjy free. It isn't as if his grandmother needed his wages. She's a hell of a lot better off financially than I am. Her house is paid for, she doesn't have to buy clothes; she wears Mother's and Gracia's, which fit her perfectly, and Benjy has always worn mine. She has banked all Roselle's pay and Benjy's in her own name ever since they started working."

Gracia lifted a warning finger to her lips. The door to the back hall was opening cautiously. Ames looked around just as his mother's tiny withered face appeared. He said, "Here's Livy, Mother," and drew her in, closing the hall door behind her, and brought her to Livy, half carrying her along so that she barely limped. She was so tiny that he could have lifted her with one arm. An armful of fragile bones and chiffon.

"Ames, dearest, please, you must be more careful, talking about Mrs. Prout," her voice was not much louder than a stage whisper, her faded blue eyes were stretched to their widest, her tiny twisted hands were fluttering madly. "I know she's deaf in one ear and she was talking steadily herself, but I could hear you and I was terrified that she might. We don't want to go to the hotel for dinner. The food there is so poor."

She seized Livy's hand in both of hers and patted it, her little head tipped to one side, appealing and arch.

"I'm so happy that you could come, my dear. I do hope we can make you comfortable and that the dinner won't be a failure. I'm sure of the pies, at least. They're all made and cooling on the pantry shelf."

Livy was cooling, too. Gracia could see it.

Don't snub her. Don't dare to snub her. Can't you realize how much the little thing wants to be liked? Can't you see how sweet she is and how excited, all dressed up in her new blue dress with her hair rolled a new way and pearls in her ears to do Ames credit and to do you honor?

"Livy? It's really Olivia, isn't it?"

She was batting her eyes incessantly, as she did when she was excited, and her long deeply grooved upper lip was drawn down to hide her teeth so that her smile was almost a simper. She always smiled that way; it was the habit of years; her teeth had never been attractive and were now full of gold. Screwing her face into a grimace was the habit of years, too. Her wrinkles had come as much from overexpressiveness, Gracia thought, as from age.

Livy was regarding her with bleak distrust.

"No, it isn't Olivia. It never has been except for severe scoldings. It's Livy even on checks if I'm prosperous enough to have a checking account."

She sounded brusque. She drew her hand away and put it behind her.

"But Olivia is a beautiful name," Mrs. Chelsea twittered.

"I don't like it," said Livy curtly, "and I don't answer to it."

It was rude. Perhaps she didn't mean it to sound so. Perhaps she had gone through life explaining that her name wasn't Olivia. That sort of thing could be very exasperating. But if she hoped to get anywhere with Ames Chelsea, she would have to be nice to Elspeth.

Ames said, irritable and strained, "Do we have to stand around the hall all afternoon?" and Elspeth gasped, "Haven't you taken her up yet, Gracia? Oh, no, there's her bag. Oh, dear, how inhospitable we are. Ames, dearest, take her bag up. Gracia, you show her where to go. My dear, will you forgive me if I don't go up? I'm not very good at stairs. I expect you'd like a little rest before dinner. You must be exhausted from that long train ride. Trains are so dreadful. I haven't been on one for years. Even short trips in the car shake me to pieces. Would you like a little nap? We'll keep very quiet. We'll go on tiptoe. We won't even breathe."

You needn't look at her like that, thought Gracia angrily. As if she were some sort of vivacious insect. And don't dare to step on her.

"I'm not in the least tired," said Livy. "I'm never tired. I love riding on trains. I always find someone amusing to talk to. I picked up an asbestos salesman this noon and he insisted on buying me an enormous lunch. He showed me snapshots of his three little boys. They looked like puddings. Here, I'll take that suitcase, Ames. I know its frailties."

She tried to take it and he resisted. She said, "Oh, give it here. I can carry my own luggage. I'm not crippled."

The lock gave way and the battered bag fell open, spewing its contents over the rug. Facial tissues, yellow pajamas, a hairbrush, stockings, a black satin evening girdle. Livy opened her mouth, her facial expression profane, but all she said, spontaneously, was, "Ow!"

"Why, Ames!" gasped his mother. "Ames Chelsea!"

"Yes, I know," he said, "I know, Mother. I kicked her."

He began scooping up Livy's possessions and stuffing them back into the bag. He said, his face red, "Livy understands perfectly. It's part of a sign language we have."

Livy was rocking with laughter. She picked up a jar of

cold cream and dropped it again, weak with laughter. Apparently she liked being kicked. She looked radiant, but Ames did not. He gathered the suitcase up in both arms. She said, "I ought to have put a strap around it before I started. I knew it had a dropped stomach. The damned thing needs a truss."

Gracia led the way upstairs and into her room. I hate her, she thought. She's loud. She's brash. I hate sharing my lovely room with her. She throws everything out of proportion, the whole house, our whole quiet life.

The room grew small when Livy entered it. The ceiling shut down. The pale colors turned drab. Gracia stepped quickly to the windows and ran the chintz shades to the top to let in more light.

"Thanks, darling," said Livy. Taking the suitcase from Ames, she leaned across it and kissed his cheek.

So she knows him that well, Gracia thought. And until last night he never mentioned her name. But perhaps she kissed the asbestos salesman, too. With some girls it means nothing.

"I've emptied a drawer for you in this chest, Livy, and there are plenty of hangers in this closet."

"I'll just hang up this dinner dress," said Livy. "I didn't bring much."

Enough to make the room look as if a cyclone had struck it. She had dumped her suitcase, grimy and smeared at one corner with what might be tar, on one of the beds, crumpling the gray taffeta spread. And taffeta wouldn't cleanse. She was burrowing among her possessions, tossing them out right and left, like a dog going after a well-buried bone.

"Where did that hairbrush go to?"

She tossed an armful of lingerie over a chair and some fell on the floor. A shoe landed on the rug beside Gracia.

"I believe my powder box is in the toe of that," said Livy. "Would you look and see?"

She found her brush and went at once to the dressing table and sat to brush her hair with vigor. Gracia watched, mute. What masses of hair. Far too much. It needed thinning. It was a thickly curling mop, and her eyelashes, black like her hair, were thick and curling. Her eyes were black, too, and her skin very white, not dead white like her blouse, but warm and alive-looking. Her eyes met Gracia's in the mirror and she smiled.

"You're just as nice as I knew you'd be, Gracia. I knew from the way he spoke of you that I'd like you."

So he had spoken of her.

"I knew you were the one in his family that he liked the best and felt closest to. There's always one, isn't there, no matter how fond you may be of the others? With me it was Hank, perhaps because we're only a year apart and a lot alike except that he's more impulsive than I am and more explosive."

I hope I never come across Hank, thought Gracia.

"I'm very, very fond of my father, and I liked my mother well enough, though I never did see eye to eye with her. But Hank and I are two halves of the same apple."

She wrenched the cover off her powder box and a cloud of powder filled the air and settled on her red jacket and on the glass top of the dressing table and on Gracia's brush and comb.

"You don't look a bit like Ames, though, do you?" she said. "So fair. I've always had a tremendous admiration for blondness in women, but I always seem to fall in love with men that are dark; I'm predisposed to like them because of Hank, I expect. We both have Mother's coloring and Pa's big bones."

"I believe my powder box is in the toe of that," said Livy. "Would you look and see?"

She found her brush and went at once to the dressing table and sat to brush her hair with vigor. Gracia watched, mute. What masses of hair. Far too much. It needed thinning. It was a thickly curling mop, and her eyelashes, black like her hair, were thick and curling. Her eyes were black, too, and her skin very white, not dead white like her blouse, but warm and alive-looking. Her eyes met Gracia's in the mirror and she smiled.

"You're just as nice as I knew you'd be, Gracia. I knew from the way he spoke of you that I'd like you."

So he had spoken of her.

"I knew you were the one in his family that he liked the best and felt closest to. There's always one, isn't there, no matter how fond you may be of the others? With me it was Hank, perhaps because we're only a year apart and a lot alike except that he's more impulsive than I am and more explosive."

I hope I never come across Hank, thought Gracia.

"I'm very, very fond of my father, and I liked my mother well enough, though I never did see eye to eye with her. But Hank and I are two halves of the same apple."

She wrenched the cover off her powder box and a cloud of powder filled the air and settled on her red jacket and on the glass top of the dressing table and on Gracia's brush and comb.

"You don't look a bit like Ames, though, do you?" she said. "So fair. I've always had a tremendous admiration for blondness in women, but I always seem to fall in love with men that are dark; I'm predisposed to like them because of Hank, I expect. We both have Mother's coloring and Pa's big bones."

Gracia sat perfectly still.

Why did she expect me to look like Ames? Why is she talking about brothers and sisters looking alike? Does she think I'm his sister?

She thought back over what he had said in the hall in those first moments of greeting. Here she is, Gracia. This is Livy. Then he had introduced them. Livy, this is Gracia Chelsea.

That was all. He hadn't specified, This is my sister-in-law. He hadn't said, This is my brother Rufus' cast-off wife.

Resentment welled up in her. Against Ames, first. He ought to have told Livy about the divorce. He shouldn't have left it for her to do. It was cruelly inconsiderate of him.

She couldn't blame him for more than a minute. She could always find an excuse for him. He was the most considerate person alive, especially to her. Livy was to blame, somehow. She had addled his wits.

If I tell her myself, now, thought Gracia, she'll break out in a rash of horrible questions. I won't take that. He wouldn't want me to. Let him tell her himself when I'm not around. Let him answer the questions.

"I'm a little mixed about the Howes," said Livy. "Is Serena another sister or what?"

"A first cousin," said Gracia. "She was Serena Chelsea. Her husband is games and history master, at least he teaches one history course and the rest is hockey and squash and skiing and basketball, at the Upham School for boys, which is about three hours from here by car when the roads are passable so they get home for week ends fairly often except in midwinter. They've been married three years. It's one of those ideal marriages. You never saw such turtledoves."

Ames shouted from below, "What goes on up there? Aren't you two coming down?"

Livy flung down the fat pink puff.

"Coming!" she shouted back happily, and to Gracia, "I'll tidy this up later," and ran.

Gracia sat where she was with her back to a window. The room without Livy was restful again. Being by herself for a minute was restful. Behind her the leaves of the big old maples whispered and sighed. A faint current of air was cool on her neck. She pushed her fingers up through her hair, pressing hard against her scalp which seemed to be drawn too tightly. Her head didn't actually ache but the sensation of tightness was unpleasant and her eyeballs felt scorched. I need ten hours of sleep, she thought. I'd wake up ten years younger. I wonder how old she is. She could be any age between twenty and thirty. Her skin is magnificent. Perfect, like Serena's.

She lifted a hand to her cheek. There was nothing wrong with her own skin. There was no reason why Livy should make her feel withered and faded.

He's always talked to me about the girls he was interested in. But he never seemed very much interested. He didn't mention this one. Not a word until last night, and then not much. He simply put through that long distance call and then walked into the living room and said, "Mother, I've invited a girl here for the long week end. That's all right, isn't it? I know the Howes will be here but Livy can have the extra bed in Gracia's room, can't she, Gracia?"

Just that, and not much else. Perhaps he didn't know much else about her. He had met her at the Hallams'. He had seen her once after that. He had made only two business trips in the spring, and perhaps the second hadn't been entirely business.

She did personnel work in a store. He had been pretty

vague, explaining to his mother exactly what it was that Livy did.

Aunt Bethy had been most discreet. She always was. She had asked only a few and very casual questions. But she had been ready to burst with excitement and curiosity. She was always excited and pleased when he showed interest in a girl. She was eager for him to marry, though she never said so to him, and only hinted it to Gracia.

Interest. Of course he's interested or he wouldn't have invited the girl to come here. But that doesn't mean he's in love with her. It doesn't mean that he's actually thinking of marriage.

Gracia glanced about the disordered room. He should take a look at this, she thought.

Powder all over the dressing table and some on the rug. Curly dark threads of hair left clinging to the brush. Stockings draped over a chair back. The suitcase yawning wide. Odds and ends of clothing strewn over the bed. A low-heeled silver sandal in the middle of the floor.

He ought to see this mess, she thought. He'd faint. He's more of an old maid than I am about disorder.

She began to pick up and smooth out and fold and put away. There was no reason why she should do maid service for a stranger. She ought to be downstairs, setting the table. It couldn't be trusted to Mrs. Prout. A table laid by Mrs. Prout looked as if she had stood three feet away and hurled the knives and spoons.

A car was stopping in the driveway. It sounded like the Howes' yellow roadster. Nearly half past five. Rich, as usual, would be ravenous.

She started toward the door and met Serena hurrying in. "Gracia, where's Rich?"

"I don't know," said Gracia. "Didn't he find you at Dakin's? He went galloping off around four o'clock to hunt for you."

Serena pulled the printed kerchief off her head and tucked it into a pocket of her green coat.

"I didn't stay at Dakin's very long. It was terribly crowded. I'm going down the first thing in the morning. Their winter evening things are marked down to practically nothing."

She said, "What a mess this room is. What's the girl like, Gracia? I thought she must have arrived. I heard a strange voice in the living room as I came by, but I didn't stop. I knew Rich wasn't there. He would have come out when he heard the car. Is she pretty, Gracia?"

"Mm," said Gracia.

"What does that mean?"

"I have to go down and set the table."

"Oh, wait a minute."

Serena was at the mirror. She took out three hairpins and put them in again. Her yellow hair was perfectly straight and she wore it drawn smoothly back from her broad forehead and small neat ears, gathered into a shining double loop low in her neck. Only a very pretty face could stand it, thought Gracia, watching.

"What did Rich want? I thought he was going to play tennis."

"He couldn't get anyone to play with him. He didn't say what he wanted you for but he seemed excited. Something to do with a phone call that came through to him about four o'clock from the School."

Serena spun round. There was anxiety in her light brown eyes.

"Why can't they leave him alone?" her high light voice

was petulant. "I think it's mean, the way they keep after him when he's supposed to be having a holiday. We never have any time off at the School. You know how it is. He's on the job seven days a week. Saturday is nothing but matches and rallies, and celebrations if a team wins, and Sundays we have to go to faculty teas, and to Chapel twice. I'm not complaining for myself. I'm perfectly happy wherever Rich is, but he gets discontented if he doesn't have a little time to himself. I did want us to have this week end without anything horrid happening."

She was standing, busy with her habitual small gestures, straightening her skirt, pulling down her girdle, craning her neck to see that her stocking seams perfectly bisected the backs of her beautiful legs. No need to fuss so, thought Gracia with some impatience. Serena's dresses always fitted well and with that figure she would have been attractive in a gunny sack. But she seemed to require perpetual reassurance from every looking glass.

She turned sideways.

"This belt is too loose. I must move the buckle. Do you think I could wear the neck any lower in front?"

"Not without indecent exposure," said Gracia drily.

Serena laughed. She was proud of her low full breasts and her small waist. A woman, she said frequently, shouldn't look like a boy or like an ironing board, either.

"What's Livy wearing? I suppose her name's Olivia."

"It isn't," said Gracia, "and she's wearing a red wool suit."

"What did she bring with her?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," said Gracia with asperity.

"Oh, don't be a prig," said Serena lightly and opened the closet. "This must be hers. You never wear black. Is this all she brought? Oh Lord, one of those women who thinks she can go anywhere with a suit and a good black dinner dress."

She inspected the unfamiliar garment critically and without a vestige of shame. Whatever else she was, thought Gracia, she wasn't furtive.

"Very good indeed," approved Serena, "or it was, three years ago. Everything this season has sleeves."

"I'm going down now," said Gracia at the door and waited for Serena. Come along, come along. Get out of my room. I'm not going to leave you here to go through the rest of Livy's belongings or mine, either.

Come along, Mrs. Howes.

3

"LIVY," he said, "this is my kid cousin, Mrs. Richmond Howes. Pretty, isn't she?"

"Pretty! Pete's sake," said Livy, "she's beautiful."

Serena glowed, as innocently delighted as if no one had ever admired her before.

Good girl, Livy, thought Ames. You've made a friend, and quickly, too.

Not that his cousin's approval counted for very much, or her enmity, either, since she didn't live in the house or even in the town. But every little would help, and his mother was extremely fond of Serena. His mother was fond of anyone who was nice to her. She would be fond of Livy when she had a chance to know her better, even though the first meeting had been a little strained. What had come over Livy? She wasn't usually so brusque. But how did he know what she usually was? He had seen her twice. She had been warm and sweet and responsive enough then. Alone with him. That was all very well. It was better than very well. It had been wonderful. But she had snubbed his mother. Perhaps she hadn't meant to. Perhaps his warnings had only made her tense, unlike herself.

She was doing better now.

"Mrs. Howes," he said, "you're being flattered. Don't let it turn your head."

Serena pouted. She had that kind of mouth, full-lipped and very small. Too small for her round face, he thought. He preferred Livy's.

"I wouldn't dream of flattering anybody," said Livy. "I can get as much pleasure from looking at a pretty girl as you can. Not the same sort, of course."

"I should hope not," he said, laughing.

It was exciting, having her in the midst of his family. Nerve-racking. He was fearfully on edge. But at least he felt alive. Lately, in the last six weeks especially, since that last evening with her, he had found his customary routine deadly dull. He had been only half alive, half of his mind preoccupied with her.

"I know," she was saying indignantly. "I know. You have that silly masculine conviction that a woman can't look at a pretty woman without jealousy tearing at her liver. It's idiotic. You can admire good looks in another man, can't you?"

"I can," he said, "but I don't."

He was so much keyed up that he found himself laughing at the most trivial things she said and sometimes not even hearing what she said but only the quality of her voice. He was so oversensitive that he found himself unreasonably annoyed at the way she tapped the ash from her cigarette. His awareness of her and of his family was painfully acute. He found himself seeing her through their eyes and seeing them through hers at one and the same time. He wanted to slap Serena for the way she was inspecting Livy's clothes, detail by detail. He could hear what she was thinking and what she would say to Gracia and his mother later on, "She could be attractive if she knew how to dress." Why should it irritate him and make him critical of Livy? Serena said it of almost every girl she knew. She had said it about Gracia,

even, the first time Rufus had brought Gracia home to meet his family. She never said it about Gracia now.

He sprang up restlessly and went to the door of the dining room.

"Do you have to do this, Gracia? Can't Mrs. Prout?"

"I've finished," she said.

He caught her hand.

"Then come in with the rest of us."

There were violet shadows under her eyes and her heavy eyelids looked bruised, the rims of them faintly pink. Her face was colorless, her mouth a little pinched.

"Aren't you thinner, Gracia?"

She shook her head, smiling. Perhaps he hadn't really looked at her lately. Certainly her face was thinner than it used to be, the cheeks faintly hollowed, the narrow high-bridged nose appearing larger than it was.

"I suppose you had another bad night, you poor child."

"I never heard so many birds," she said. "The racket they made! I got up to see if Florence was after them again."

"Some day she'll get her eyes pecked out."

"Your mother wants to bell her. Then nobody will get any sleep."

They laughed together. Back in the living room he felt more relaxed and more secure because she was sitting across from him, but it distressed him a little to see how worn she looked beside Livy, almost shrunken, her fair hair lusterless and dry, its careful waves too rigid. It wasn't fair to seat her so close to Livy. She was only a year older. She appeared much more. Well, why wouldn't she? Livy had never had a smashed-up marriage and she had probably never lost a night's sleep in her life.

"Did you find anything at the sale, Serena, dearest?" his mother was asking as breathlessly as if the fate of the world

hung on the answer. He hoped Livy wouldn't think she was always like this, twittering and fluttering and grimacing. She had always talked with her hands, gesticulating more than most people did, but he was so accustomed to it that usually he hardly noticed; he was accustomed to the excessive responsiveness of her face, too; but watching her now through Livy's eyes, as it were, listening to her breathless, overanimated little voice, he was acutely embarrassed. She must seem ridiculous to Livy. The possibility of that made him angry with Livy, not with his mother.

"Serena is the cleverest little shopper, Livy," his mother was doing her best to bring Livy into the talk. "She finds the most marvelous bargains. I never found a real bargain in my life. Oh, I've bought things marked down but when I tried them on at home there was always something peculiar about them, and I never have the courage to take back a purchase, so I'd just have to pass them along to Mrs. Prout. That doesn't sound very nice, but it's an absolute fact that Mrs. Prout prefers peculiar garments."

She was only trying to be entertaining, he thought defensively. She was chattering like mad only because she was stimulated by the presence of a stranger. Alone with Gracia and himself she was frequently quiet for an entire evening, her hands lying at rest in her lap.

"You have no idea, Livy, what an artist this child is with her needle, and she taught herself to sew. I used to love to do simple sewing but I never could turn out miracles as Serena does. I always put the sleeves in backward or something. Do you sew, my dear?"

Livy said, "Oh, God, no."

"I don't like sewing," said Serena. Her voice had no more depth or color to it than a small child's treble. "But at least I can avoid being duplicated when I make my own things."

I'll never forget that ghastly Junior Prom, do you remember, Aunt Bethy, when you'd given me that sweet green velvet and there was Lucile in the mate of it. I came straight home and cried all night."

The trivia that women talked! His nerves were jumping. It was awful to be the only male in a roomful of women. Their everlasting clucking. It was worse than a damned hen-house. Now they were all going it, Gracia and Livy and all of them.

He must be out of his mind to consider adding a wife to a family already top-heavy with women. His house swarmed with women. Even Celeste's children were girls. Even the house cat was a female. If he did marry and reproduce, he was sure to have daughters.

"I wish I could find something really unusual to wear in my hair tomorrow night," that was Serena. "Gardenias are so common. What would you think of white bouvardia, Aunt Bethy? The fragrance might be a little overpowering."

"Mother's casket was topped with a sheaf of that stuff," said Livy. "It outsmelled all the rest. I haven't been able to wear flowers since."

Why couldn't she hold onto herself? Even if the idiotic chatter bored and irritated her as much as it bored and irritated him, she might at least keep her mouth shut. She didn't need to go out of her way to snub Serena. It would hurt his mother, too. His mother was devoted to Serena.

She's doing it on purpose, he thought angrily. She's intelligent enough to be perfectly aware of what she's doing and saying. Even if she doesn't like my family, the least she can do is pretend and be decent while she's a guest in the house. It wouldn't hurt her to pretend a little, for politeness' sake. She came here because she wanted to. She didn't have to come.

She had been rude and cold to his mother at meeting, and now she was deliberately trying to irritate Serena, and why should she? If she cared anything at all about him, she could try to be agreeable.

"I wonder where Rich is," Serena was murmuring anxiously.

"Now there you see the ideal marriage, Livy," the edge in his voice had nothing to do with what he was saying, only with what he was thinking. "Married three years and she can't rest easy while her big baboon is out of her sight. And when he's around, she's always on the arm of his chair or in his lap."

Serena's creamy face turned peach-colored but she liked that kind of mockery.

"Ames, you're silly. Don't listen to him, Livy. He thinks he can tease me because I've lived in his family since I was fourteen and he thinks of me as a kid sister. You always teased me more than you ever did Celeste, you know, Ames."

"Because I got results," he said. "It was never any fun teasing Celeste."

"Wouldn't she fight back?" asked Livy. "Hank and I were always fighting. That's why I missed him so bitterly when he left home."

"Nobody in this house fights back," said Ames.

"Except Florence," Gracia reminded him. "Stop her, Ames. She's after the birds again."

He said, "Floosy, come here."

The white cat lay flat on the window sill, her plumed tail twitching, her small head moving in tiny jerks as her eyes followed the sparrows moving about on the grass outside the screen. Whimpering cries came from her throat. When Ames picked her up she bit his thumb and struggled madly,

but when he brought her back to the sofa and crossed his knees, she spread herself peacefully along his thigh, her claws hooked into his trouser-leg, her head well up, her pansy face innocent of blood-lust.

"She's beautiful," said Livy with as much enthusiasm as when she had said the same thing earlier about Serena. "Let me hold her, Ames."

"She'll get white hairs all over you."

"I don't care."

"You'd care if she clawed you. Don't touch her! She won't take petting from anyone but me and then only when she feels like it."

"Shows her sense," said Livy.

"I hate cats," said Serena, "especially that one. She hides behind doors and reaches out when you pass and snags your stockings."

"Why should you care?" asked Ames. "I always pay for them."

"I like cats," said Livy. "I always wanted one at home, but Mother said it would make the house smell."

Elsbeth's tiny nose began to sniff. She was full of alarm.

"I don't notice any odor, do you, Gracia? Oh, dear, perhaps we're used to it and so we don't notice it. She's a wonderfully clean cat. Always washing."

Gracia broke in soothingly, "You know the Hallams, Livy. Ames says he met you at their apartment. Have you seen them recently? Mrs. Hallam and her sister used to live here in Hotchkiss. Lucile was in Serena's class in high school."

Livy sat up.

"I haven't met Lucile. She's the one you spoke about, Serena, wearing the duplicate of your dress. Is she nice?"

"I never cared for her," said Serena.

"Please tell me plainly. I want to know. My brother Hank wrote me to look the Hallams up. Personally I find them tiresome. Is the sister a well-meaning bore like Mrs. Hallam or is she something else again?"

Serena said, "I wouldn't trust her an inch. She's selfish and treacherous and a liar."

"Oh, dearest, you mustn't say such things," whispered Elspeth, horrified.

"Well, she was just that in school," said Serena. "I know you older people were taken in by that sweet way she had, but I knew what she was. She may be different now but I doubt it."

Livy groaned.

"I was afraid of it. Hank picks the worst women."

"You mean your brother's interested in her?" cried Serena. "Well, don't let him marry her or he'll be good and sorry."

"He already has," said Livy, "and doubtless he already is. Oh, poor Hank. Three marriages and every one a flop. You know what people always think about a man who keeps marrying the wrong women. They think it's all his own fault. They think there's something awfully queer about him. Not that it matters very much what other people think. But it matters what Hank thinks about himself."

"You mean he was married twice before Lucile?" cried Serena, shocked and delighted. "How simply awful. Imagine being a third wife."

"But it isn't Hank's fault," insisted Livy. "He just has bad judgment. The girl he married his freshman year at Tech was a spoiled brat with a rich father who managed to get it annulled but not before there was a beastly row and Hank was put in jail for assault; I mean assault on the father. He got right out again, but you can see what it would

do to him, and to my mother. There was hell to pay. He kept away from girls for a while and finally he took another chance on a sweet, meek, quiet girl, and we all did hope it would turn out to be a satisfactory marriage, one that would last and make him happy, but she was a bitch. He finally made her give him a divorce, and everybody thought he was a villain, including the judge, I guess, because Hank has to pay her enormous alimony and how he's going to keep on doing it and support another wife is more than I know. I do think a woman who's able-bodied and childless ought to be ashamed to take alimony, whether the marital smash-up was her fault or not. She ought to be obliged to get out and earn her keep."

There was a dreadful silence. Ames knew he ought to break it, or break Livy's head, but he could think of nothing to say that wouldn't make matters worse. His mother's face was frozen in anguish. He didn't look at Gracia's. He didn't have to. He knew it would show nothing.

In the silence the cat's purr was loud.

"Be quiet, Floosy!" he said.

She began to knead his leg, digging her claws in.

"Get down, you trollop!" he said, and cuffed her. She shot across the room to hide under the piano, snarling. Elspeth said, "Oh, poor Florence. She didn't mean to hurt you, dearest," and he was ashamed of having taken out his wrath on the cat. He saw surprise and question in Livy's eyes. He said, "Come for a walk, Livy. We've an hour before dinner."

He could get her out of the house, at least.

"Oh, good," she said, "I need to move about after all that sitting in the train," and slipped her hand through his arm, but he moved away from her abruptly. He realized that if he went out alone with her he would explode into anger,

cuff her as he had cuffed the cat, but verbally, and she would certainly fight back, reproaching him for not having told her about his brother and Gracia and the divorce. He was in no mood to take reproaches, especially when they were perfectly justified. There would be a real row, and the week end was still before them.

"Gracia, come with us."

"I can't," she said instantly. "I have things to do."

She didn't want to be a third, an extra, a chaperon for lovers. Well, to him she never could be. He was always glad to have her around. Her reluctance made him the more determined. He pulled her up out of her chair. She seemed to weigh nothing. Her hands were cool and boneless in his.

Livy was disappointed. He could see it and was glad of it. She had hoped for an hour alone with him.

"Dearest," said his mother, "why don't you stop in at Celeste's and ask her to come and have dinner with us since Charles is away?"

He nodded. He opened the screen door for the girls to go out, and Florence galloped toward it, but he stopped her with his foot. She began to worry his shoelace, as if going out of the house were the last thing in her mind.

"Be off with you, Floosy."

He let himself out, shutting the screen in her face. She pushed her pink nose against it, mewing piteously.

"We'll go the back way, Gracia," he said. "You can show Livy your iris."

She led the way around the house in silence. She must hate Livy, he thought miserably, for that gabble about divorce and sweet, meek, quiet wives and able-bodied childless wives who accepted alimony.

"I'm just sick about this new marriage of Hank's," said Livy. "It doesn't sound a bit good, though your pretty

cousin may be prejudiced about Lucile. But after two failures, everybody will expect another, and Hank will be blamed. I could tell by that shocked silence just now in the house that your mother and maybe the rest of you thought I was trying to excuse him because he's my brother and that he must be a villain. And he isn't. He just has bad taste in women, and that isn't a crime, is it?"

"Speaking of bad taste," said Ames sharply, "will you kindly not talk about bitches in front of my mother?"

"Oh," she said, "did I? I'm sorry. It slipped out. And anyhow, she is one. Not your mother."

She added with only faint malice, "You have interesting pet names for your cat. But I suppose you can say what you like; you're the man of the house. I must expurgate. It's that blasted old double standard."

She swung round in the path to face him.

"Darling, what are you so cross about?"

Her eyes were pleading with him, and he wavered. He felt his wrath slipping away from him. But just beyond her was Gracia's rigid narrow back. He said, "I need my dinner. I'm always ugly when I need food. I didn't have an asbestos salesman to buy me a huge luncheon."

She laughed with some uncertainty and went on to stand with Gracia at the white picket fence that surrounded the oblong garden.

"We had to fence it this year," Gracia explained, "because of the neighborhood dogs, and we even had to padlock the gate because of Celeste's little girls; they pull the heads off everything within reach, and Celeste won't allow us to say 'No' or 'Don't' to them. She has a theory about discipline, but theories didn't save my tulips last year. I had eighty white ones in bloom at once and the little girls got every one."

The garden was green and blue, masses of iris with narrow turf paths, masses of pale blue curly blossoms and swordlike leaves.

"Only one color," said Livy. "Don't you like the yellow ones or the common purple ones?"

Gracia reached over the fence to snap off withered blooms.

"They go by fast," she said. "That's the trouble with a spring garden. But it's heavenly while it's blooming. I had blue and yellow and white crocuses at Easter, and grape hyacinths, but something spoiled the tulips. Yes, I like the other kinds of iris, but I like these the best. I suppose it's very unimaginative to have all one color, and when I'm ordering new bulbs I always think I ought to branch out a little and experiment. But I never do. It seems silly to take what I like only second-best when I can have what I dearly love."

Her composure was incredible, thought Ames. If there was any emotional disturbance in her, it didn't show. Her voice was quiet and cool as always, her gray eyes calm. But out here in the sunlight, standing close to Livy, she looked even more fragile, more worn, than she had in the house. She wasn't a small girl; she was narrow and small-boned, but as tall as Serena, and she held herself beautifully; but her flesh, in the sunlight, seemed almost transparent, like her flowered gray organdy dress. Insubstantial, somehow. Perhaps that was why she never got on his nerves; she could be in the room with him for hours, and he could forget she was there; yet when he needed her, there she was.

When Livy was with him, there would be no forgetting it. One hour in his house, and she had set his family by the ears. If things went on as they had so far, the Chelseas would all be hospital cases by Monday morning. Nervous wrecks, all of them. But not she. By no means. She would depart

blithely, none the worse for a harrowing week end. It wasn't that she was insensitive to changes in the emotional atmosphere. She caught on to them quickly enough, especially to changes in his own mood. But they didn't seem to have any real effect on her. She spoke out plainly about what distressed or bewildered her. She got it out of her system and out of her mind. Impossible to imagine her nursing a secret grief. Impossible to think of her tortured with doubt or remorse.

She had lost interest in the garden and had turned her back on it. She would do that, he thought, on any person or situation that bored her. It evidently did not occur to her to feign interest in the garden in order to please Gracia.

"Why did Serena grow up in your family, Ames? Has she no parents?"

"She has a father, my Uncle Rufe, but she hasn't spoken to him in years. Her mother died after a long-drawn-out and pretty dreadful illness, when Serena was fourteen, and two months later Uncle Rufe up and married the nurse, an extremely nice girl who'd been through the whole sorrowful business with them and whom Serena had liked very much up till the marriage. But you can see how a heartbroken kid of fourteen might feel about it. She turned up at our breakfast table one morning, as desolate a little creature as you ever saw, with swollen eyes and a Trilby haircut and a dark blue school uniform, and threw herself on Mother's neck and asked if she couldn't live with us. Well, Mother let her. Mother was pretty mad at Uncle Rufe herself."

"There's certainly nothing desolate about Serena now," said Livy. "What a figure, and she certainly knows how to show it off. I'll bet she goes in for white satin ball gowns and black chiffon nightgowns, or maybe she doesn't go to balls, since she lives at a boys' school, but there can't be any

doubt that she goes to bed."

Gracia burst out laughing.

"You're right," she said, "and you didn't have to look into her clothes closet, either. She has a black chiffon nightgown and a white satin dinner dress with her this week end, both new. She showed them to me before she'd been in the house ten minutes."

Livy laughed, too, and Ames eyed the pair of them in wonder and thankfulness. If they could laugh together like that, like friends, at something which made no sense to him, some secret knowledge of Serena that seemed to them amusing, then he didn't have to worry any more. Gracia couldn't laugh like that if she were angry with Livy for that talk about divorce and alimony. She must have realized that Livy meant no harm and she was too generous to hold against her what had been uttered unwittingly.

His heart was suddenly as light as their easy laughter. For the first moment since Livy's arrival, he really relaxed. He put an arm through hers and an arm through Gracia's and linking them together, marched them away from the iris garden through the beeches to where his lot ended and Celeste's began.

If Gracia liked Livy, the week end might be all right after all. If she accepted Livy, everything might be all right.

4

BESIDE Celeste's kitchen garden was a brick-paved yard with clotheslines stretched across it, and beyond that a wide walk of herringbone brick and eight steps leading up to the back porch. The house was narrow and very tall, painted battleship gray.

"That second-floor room at the right," said Ames, "where you see the ecru curtains, is where I was born, Livy. Hotchkiss didn't have a cottage hospital in those days."

"Neither did Littlefield."

"I looked out of that window," he said, "when I was exactly one week old and saw Mrs. Prout pinning my diapers on that clothesline. Was I embarrassed. That's what's called the dawn of consciousness. Or do I mean self-consciousness? It's an ugly old house, isn't it? Mother never liked it. But Celeste has always thought it the best house in town, because she grew up in it; that gives you an idea of my sister. She wanted to go on living in it after she married, but we didn't have room, so she and Charles took an apartment, and when Dad died and Mother wanted to move, Celeste and Charles and the two little girls took possession. Phyllis wasn't born yet; she's not quite three, but she was much in evidence. Daphne is four. They're big bruisers, almost as big as their mother already. Let's go in through the kitchen."

He called, "Hi!" and Livy heard squeals. In the kitchen

two little brown-haired girls in bibs hurtled at Ames and tried to swarm up his legs.

"Lay off me!" he protested. "You've got mush all over you. Oh, you're disgusting."

His sister spoke across them calmly, "You're Livy, aren't you? I'm Celeste. I won't shake hands. I'm stoning these prunes and there's no point in washing until I've finished. Girls, go back and finish your cereal."

She was as small as her mother. As small as a child, and as flat. Her dark blue dress hung on her like a sack, not because it was itself shapeless but because the figure under it had no curves. Her face was small and flat like her mother's, with the same short neat nose and long upper lip, but, unlike Mrs. Chelsea's, it was so calm as to seem expressionless. Her eyes were brown, like Ames'; so was the flat braid pinned about her head. No make-up relieved her extreme sallowness.

"Livy, these are my nieces," said Ames. "Daphne and Phyllis. I wouldn't advise shaking hands. Phyllis has something adhesive all over her paws. God, it's all over mine now. What is it, Phyllis?"

"Mummalade," said Phyllis.

"Girls," said Celeste, "go back to the table."

They did not budge. Daphne stood with her plump legs wide apart and her stomach stuck out, regarding Livy out of round bright blue eyes. Her straight brown hair was cut short in back and banged across her forehead.

"You're tall, aren't you?" she said. She enunciated with clarity, and her tone was disparaging.

Livy said, "Yes, I am. Lots of people are. More and more all the time. It's the orange juice and codliver oil and vitamins. Probably when you're my age you'll be as tall as I am."

"No," said Daphne positively, "I won't. How old are you?"

"Twenty-eight."

"Mumma's thirty," said Daphne. "Gracia's twenty-nine. So's Uncle Ames. Gumma's a hundred."

"Aren't you wonderful," said Livy drily. "With you around, nobody needs a family Bible."

"We got a Bible," said Daphne. She stuck her stomach out a little farther. Her tone was insufferably smug. "I go to Sunday School. I go to the Congregational Church. We have the best Sunday School in Hotchkiss. God makes a speech to us every Sunday."

"Daffy," said her mother, "finish your supper."

"No," said Daffy.

Celeste put two dishes of prunes on the low square-topped table, picked up Daffy's overturned chair, picked up Phyllis and sat her down in front of her cereal dish, all with calmness and precision. Phyllis began to spoon up her mush in great dollops, spilling most of it down her front, but Daffy stood her ground, staring up at Livy.

"What did you bring me?"

Livy said, "I didn't bring you anything. I didn't know you existed until I got here."

"She thinks that anyone who comes on a train should bring her a present," Celeste explained, "because her Daddy always does when he comes back from a trip, and some of Gumma's friends do, too. I told the girls that you were coming to spend the week end at Gumma's and they've been excited about meeting you."

Excited about getting presents, thought Livy, amused. Even if I'd known he had any nieces, I probably wouldn't have thought to bring them presents.

Celeste picked up Daffy and sat her at the table.

"Drink your milk, Daffy."

"No," said Daffy. "I don't like milk. It's nasty."

She took hold of the brimming silver mug and tipped it, pouring the milk out slowly over the yellow tablecloth. Without a sign of annoyance her mother brought a bottle of milk from the icebox, refilled the mug, set it in front of Daffy, and said, "Drink your milk."

Daffy drank.

So it worked. It worked, thought Livy, if you didn't burst a blood vessel first.

She looked at Celeste with curiosity. Was there any blood in her? It didn't seem likely. It wasn't human to be so consistently tranquil. She didn't seem to be controlling and concealing natural human emotions. She appeared not to have any. Even her smile was a mere drawing back of thin lips over small white even teeth, purely mechanical, impersonal, without warmth, neither friendly nor unfriendly.

She was on her knees, mopping up the spilled milk. Daffy began to pound the table with her empty mug, shouting, "I want my present! I want my present!" while the dishes danced.

"Tomorrow," said her mother, "your Daddy will come home and bring you a present."

"I want it now!" shouted Daffy.

"You're invited to dinner with us, Celeste," said Ames. "Will you come?"

"I'd love to," said his sister. "That's a good Phyllis. Now the prunes. Oh, don't go yet, Ames. Stay and tell the girls a story. They like your bedtime stories better than mine. Livy will love seeing the girls put to bed, won't you, Livy?"

Phyllis, through a mouthful of prunes, echoed experimentally, "Libby?"

"That's right. That's her name," said Celeste, "though it's really Olivia, I expect."

"No," said Livy, with a sigh, "it isn't."

"Just Livy?" said Celeste. "How odd."

"What's odd, Mumma?" asked Daffy.

"Strange. Unusual. Eat your prunes, Daffy."

Phyllis put her spoon in her mouth and began to sing around it, "Oddoddoddoddoddoddoddodd."

"They pick up new words very quickly," said Celeste, "especially Daffy. Her vocabulary is remarkable, almost as large as my own. And do you notice how clearly she speaks? She enunciated like that from the very beginning. No baby talk. Phyllis blurs, but only because she's lazy and won't take the trouble to speak clearly. She can when she wants to. She was slower about talking than Daffy and Daffy was slower about walking, though they're equally intelligent and equally sturdy. Daffy was a very fat baby so I was glad she didn't try to walk early. I didn't want her to have bow-legs. I do think bowlegs are about the worst disadvantage a girl can have, don't you, Livy?"

"They're a help in horseback riding," said Livy.

The impulse to disagree with Celeste was uncontrollable. Her statements were as flat as her voice, irritating in the extreme.

"I want my present and I want it now!" bellowed Daffy. She picked up her saucer of prunes and threw it at Livy. It fell short, breaking in pieces, and the juice spattered Livy's ankles.

"Bedtime," said Celeste.

She stepped over the broken crockery and took Daffy's hand.

"Ames, you bring Phyllis. The stairs are steep for her legs and she dawdles."

"Livy and I will stay down here," said Gracia.

Livy gave her mute thanks. But Celeste said, "Oh, no, Livy must see the nursery. It's perfectly charming. You'll

love the curtains, Livy. Pink and blue sunbonnet babies."

In the hall she said, "Notice the staircase, Livy. Isn't it handsome? I do love a house with high ceilings and dignity. I can't bear these little boxes like Ames' house. Do you remember my wedding, Gracia, how everyone gasped when I swept down this long flight? I must show you my wedding dress sometime, Livy. I'm saving it for Daffy and Phyllis to wear. It's a superb piece of material, the best that could be purchased, so I know it won't crack or turn yellow."

She shunted her offspring into the bathroom and the others went on into the pink-walled nursery.

"This was two rooms when we lived here," said Ames.

"Serena's at that end," said Gracia, "and mine at this end. Celeste threw them together. We all thought it was a bad idea, that she'd get a great ugly barn of a room, but as usual she knew better than we did. She's always successful."

"Even if nobody else likes what she achieves," said Ames, "she likes it herself and is satisfied. That's success, I suppose."

"Does she ever get excited?" asked Livy. "Or skittish? Or sad? Or furious?"

"Never," said Ames.

"You mean she isn't human?"

"No," said Ames.

"You shouldn't say 'No' in the children's room," murmured Gracia. "Walls have ears."

He laughed.

"If she weren't always successful," he said, "she wouldn't be so complacent, and if she weren't so complacent, we'd all be fonder of her. I wanted to cut her throat three years ago when she was making alterations in this house and re-decorating and the inside of mine was being finished. It took Gracia and me weeks of mental anguish to decide on paints

and papers, and we made mistakes and rooms had to be done over, and the workmen were stupid and slow, and we tore our hair, and some of the rooms upstairs are still all wrong. Celeste picked out paper, paint, curtains, and two complete bedroom sets inside one hour, the workmen broke their necks to finish quickly for her, and the house was ready to occupy in the bat of an eyelash. And she loves it. She says it's a case of knowing what you want, making a quick decision, and having no regrets."

"It sounds fine," said Livy.

It's what I've always tried for, she thought. To know what I want, to make quick decisions, to have no regrets. I've tried. I hope that doesn't mean that I'm like Celeste.

"She went after Charles in exactly the same way," Ames went on. "She had made up her mind to marry when she was twenty-five and to have two children before she was thirty. I won't say we hoped the marriage would turn out badly. God knows we didn't. But we were doubtful about it. It's very successful. But when she said, before Daffy was born, that she wanted a son, we did hope for a girl. When Daffy arrived, Celeste was enchanted. She said she had wanted a girl all the time but thought Charles would like a son first. When Phyllis came, she was just as pleased. She said the next two would be boys and that would satisfy Charles and keep the family balanced. I've given up hoping she'll ever get a setback. I'm convinced that if she has two more children, they'll be sons."

Celeste came from the bathroom, shoving her young before her.

"Say good night to everybody," she told them. "Shake hands. I don't allow anyone to kiss them, Livy. You understand about germs."

Livy glanced at Daffy's belligerent face. The cheeks,

glossy from scrubbing, were puffed out, the eyes sparkling with temper. Heavens, she thought, I wouldn't kiss her for anything. I know what I'd catch, and it wouldn't be germs.

"Shake hands with Livy," said her mother.

"No!" shouted Daffy. "I don't like her! She didn't bring me a present!"

"Shake hands," Celeste repeated, and Livy, hypnotized by the quiet repetition, offered hers. Daffy struck it away. Her mother lifted her and tucked her into bed.

"You tuck Phyllis in, Gracia, and Uncle Ames will tell a story. Sit there by the window, Livy. That pink chair is marvelously comfortable."

Daffy reared up in bed.

"You get out of here!" she shrieked at Livy. "I don't like you! This is my room! I don't want you here!"

"I'll wait downstairs," said Livy.

"Do you mind?" asked Celeste. "I'll never get her to sleep if she doesn't quiet down."

"I'll go down, too," said Gracia, but Daffy began to bounce up and down on her bed with violence, shrieking, "You stay! You stay! It's her I don't want! Make her get out!"

If you ask me, thought Livy, finding her way along the dimly lighted hall to the stairs, with the exception of Gracia, his family are all pretty trying. No wonder he was nervous at the station. No wonder he was self-conscious, having me meet them all. He can stop worrying now, though, and so can I. I've met all except the two husbands, and being in-laws they can't count for much. Besides, I can usually get on with men.

She went down the long staircase and into Celeste's living room to sit on a hard green love seat and wait for Ames. The room was gloomy, with dark green wallpaper, dark brown

woodwork, heavy green draperies, and a green rug with roses on it. The love seat and oval-backed chairs were hideous with carving. On a marble-topped table in the bow window stood a Chinese jar of impressive hideousness over the brim of which drooped the reddish stems and hairy reddish-green leaves of a begonia plant.

It's just like Aunt Min's parlor, Livy thought. She even had a plant like that. She gave cuttings from it to everyone in Littlefield. It was like the giant spider in the Chinese fairy tale; for every hairy leg that was cut off, two thicker ones grew.

I don't wonder Mrs. Chelsea wanted to get away from this house, she thought. But it probably wasn't like this in her time. Celeste did it over. I suppose she inherited this furniture from some aunt or bought it out of somebody's attic. It's the kind that never wears out. The rump of the sitter wears out first.

She tried a chair. It was harder than the love seat.

She heard a key turning in the lock of the front door. Now who would that be? The maid, returning from some errand?

A tall man in a light gray overcoat, carrying a briefcase and a leather bag, went through the hall. Either Celeste had a lodger or else her husband had returned before he was expected, a thing no husband should do. He seemed to belong in the house. He had opened a hall closet to hang up his coat. Would he go directly upstairs or look in here first?

He looked in.

He didn't step into the room. He stood looking at her out of blank blue eyes in which there was no sign of recognition. But there had been a sign at first. Only a flicker that had vanished into blankness. He didn't speak. He stood there, tall, broad-shouldered, exactly as she had remembered him,

lounging a little, listlessly, one hand in his pocket, the other hanging loose at his side.

"Carl," she said. "Carl Brittain."

Her own voice sounded strange to her, small and weak, as it might sound if she were ill or old and feeble.

"Carl, it's Livy."

"I'm sorry," he said politely. "I'm afraid you have made some mistake."

His voice was exactly the same, gentle, a little bored, a little supercilious. He had affected that supercilious bored inflection. But with her he had not been bored.

"Carl, I'm Livy. You can't have forgotten me. I can't have changed beyond recognition. I haven't changed at all. You haven't, either."

His hair was still black, or so dark a brown as to pass for black. His eyebrows were black, his face dead-white, his thin tightly compressed lips colorless. He had always been pale but not dead-white.

Yes, he had changed, somehow. He didn't look quite alive. It was the whiteness and the blankness. But except for that his face was the one she had known so well and loved so deeply that eight years had not been able to blur it in her mind, the high broad forehead, the deep eye sockets, the short strong nose, the long strong jaw.

"I haven't made a mistake," she said. "I never mistake a friend."

"I'm sorry," he said again, "but I don't know you. I never have."

He said it, looking straight into her eyes. He said, "We were never friends."

Seeing him had confused her for a moment, so that she had forgotten where she was and why she was here. Having him speak like that shocked her into remembering where she

was, in whose house, but the confusion was still about her and a kind of nightmare, so that she cried out, "What are you doing here, Carl? Is anyone sick in this house?"

But even a family doctor, coming to visit the sick, would hardly let himself in with a key.

"I live here," he said.

He turned away abruptly. She heard him mounting the stairs.

Charles, she thought dizzily. They spoke about Charles. And nobody spoke of Celeste by her married name.

It could be.

We never called him anything but Carl. If his name was really Charles, I had forgotten it. Perhaps I never knew it.

I'm going to be sick, she thought. I can't be sick. Not here.

He cut me dead. It was the same as a cut, refusing to acknowledge me.

She grasped the chair arms with such force that the carving cut into her palms.

The week end loomed before her, painful, infinitely complicated, downright alarming. An hour ago she had been nervous about it, anxious about such trifles as making a good impression on Mrs. Chelsea. Five minutes ago she had told herself that she could stop worrying because she had met the entire family except for the in-laws, the two husbands, and they couldn't count for much, and anyway, she could usually get on with men.

Her head was bursting.

Carl Brittain. Charles Brittain. Of course he was married to Celeste. The two little girls had his blue eyes.

She saw the signpost with its white block letters blurred by rain and sun and time passing. Padua, 17 mi.

But even if I'd known how near it was, I would have come

just the same.

If I'd known he was a member of Ames' own family, if I had known he would look at me without recognition and say, "We were never friends," I wouldn't have come. I couldn't have.

He wouldn't even call me by my name. He wouldn't even hold out his hand to me.

His daughter Daffy wouldn't shake hands, either.

The memory of Daffy, of the nursery upstairs, of Celeste with her calm complacency, was steadying.

He's happily married. I don't have to feel guilty about him. He's better off right now than I am. He's happily married and has two children, settled and secure. For me nothing is settled yet. For me everything is still uncertain.

We were never friends.

How could he say such a thing to me? Why should he say it and refuse to acknowledge me? He must hate me. It's quite a hate that can last eight years.

That was what made her dizzy and sick. It was dreadful and shocking to be hated by someone who had loved her and whom she had loved. And why should he hate her?

I didn't injure him, she thought. Or if I did, I certainly didn't mean to. Perhaps it wasn't wise or kind to leave him the way I did, without a word, but nobody at twenty is very kind or wise. I had to do what I did. What else could I do?

Ames said, "Livy, where are you?"

He came into the gloomy room in a rush and had his arms around her almost before she could rise from her chair to meet him. He rubbed his cheek against hers, holding her tightly in his arms.

"You didn't mind being left down here by yourself? It seemed politic for me to stay and tell the kids a story. To please Celeste, you know. Daffy was pretty much worked

up and I didn't want Celeste to blame you if it took hours to quiet her down."

"Is she quiet now?"

"Blotto. I must be a wonderful soporific."

In spite of herself she was rigid and cold in his arms, and he let her go. He thought she was annoyed at being dismissed from the nursery and being left alone to cool her heels. She knew that was what he thought. But she couldn't explain what was the matter with her. She couldn't. She was still too much confused and shocked. She would have to ask some questions and get the situation clear before she started explaining anything. And what could she explain, anyway? If she said, "I used to know your sister's husband very well, eight years ago, but he won't admit it now," how painful and embarrassing for everyone.

"Let's get out of this house, Ames. I don't like it. I can't breathe in it."

"We have to wait for Gracia," he said.

"Then let's wait outside."

On the narrow front porch, screened by the big green leaves of Dutchman's pipe, she could breathe, but not easily yet. In a moment Celeste and Gracia came out. Celeste said, "Livy, I hope you weren't offended by the way Daffy behaved toward you. She takes antipathies to certain people. It might have been just the same even if you had thought to bring her a present, so don't feel too badly about having slipped up there."

"It wasn't a slip," said Livy curtly. "Ames didn't tell me he had young nieces, and even if he had I wouldn't have brought them gifts. I don't believe in trying to purchase good: will."

Celeste said, "Don't you like young children?"

"No," said Livy.

"What a pity," said Celeste without resentment. "Perhaps you'll feel differently when you have some of your own. I never took much interest in children before I married. Ames, tell Mother we'll be over for a little while this evening if Charles isn't too tired. We won't come to dinner. He would always rather eat at home. I hadn't planned on his being here for dinner but Roselle can scramble some eggs."

She gave Livy her meaningless mechanical smile.

"I didn't expect my husband until tomorrow night, but he rushed his business through and got home a day early. Such a surprise."

"I hate surprises," said Livy.

5

You needn't have said that, Livy."

"Yes, I need," she insisted a little sulkily. "I do hate surprises. Most kinds."

"I don't mean that. I mean your saying you didn't like children. Celeste is so literal-minded, she'll think you meant it."

"I don't believe I care very much what she thinks of me," Livy stalked bleakly along on the other side of Gracia, her hands stuffed into her pockets, her eyes on the ground. If he wanted to scold her he would have to talk across Gracia to do it. "I don't care very much about your sister, Ames. That sister. I like this one next me. I have no patience with people who ask stupid questions. They must expect rude answers. 'Don't you like young children?' My God, as if you could lump all children together. It's the same as saying, 'Don't you like people?' or 'Don't you like food, or books, or being in love?' I like some children, some people, some kinds of food, some kinds of books, and I like being in love if I'm loved in return, not otherwise."

"Celeste can be provoking," said Gracia. "She can't be with you two minutes, Ames, without getting on your nerves. You know that."

"Of course I know it," he said. "I'm not blaming Livy for getting out of patience with her. But I wish she hadn't said

that about children, because Celeste will file it away for future reference and some day she'll bring it out of her files and say to Mother, 'Isn't it a pity, Livy doesn't like children?' And you know Mother. She'll be appalled. She'll think Livy is a monster."

"Does your mother let other people make up her mind for her?" asked Livy with a bite in her voice.

"Not entirely," he was stiff but determined to be reasonable. "She's easily cowed, that's all, and she has no opinion of her own judgment and great respect for Celeste's intellect. There's something pretty impressive about the flat way in which Celeste pronounces judgment. She's so unemotional about it that in spite of yourself you have a sneaking notion she may be right."

"Then if she decides she doesn't like me," said Livy, "she'll tell your mother so, and then your mother won't like me, either. And Daffy obviously doesn't. Give me time and it will be just about unanimous. It won't take much time, either. I've done awfully well for my first three hours in Hotchkiss."

Gracia said, "We'd better hurry. It's nearly seven, isn't it, Ames? We don't want to keep Mrs. Prout waiting."

They quickened their pace.

"Celeste won't make a decision until she's seen and talked with you several times," said Ames.

"I thought you said she made very quick decisions and never had regrets."

"About furniture and clothes and things like that. But she wouldn't permit herself to rely on snap judgments of people. She says that instinctive attractions and antipathies are for children and savages. Like Daffy. Daffy is both savage and child."

"I've depended on hunches all my adult life," said Livy, "so I must be a savage."

"Celeste was pretty quick in deciding on Charles," said Gracia. "She says herself that she made up her mind to marry him after she had talked with him three times. But I suppose that wasn't an instinctive attraction, or the first time would have served."

"She made up her mind?" repeated Livy. "Had he no choice?"

"He had no choice and no chance," said Ames, "and no kick, either. I guess he could have got away from her if he had wanted to. But why wouldn't he want to marry the boss' daughter?"

Livy looked around Gracia at him.

"I don't understand. Whose boss? Whose daughter?"

"Why, he had a small job in the Press when Celeste got her eye on him," said Ames. "She made Dad raise his salary and push him up to a position of more responsibility. He's intelligent enough but completely without ambition, and Celeste is more than willing to supply the necessary push. In fact, she'd do a far better job running the business than Charles and I do together if she wanted to go in for it seriously. She has a sound business head like Dad's and no feelings whatever, and she loves to plan and direct, and people always work well for her. But she doesn't want to run the business. She'd rather run the whole town and she just about does it."

"And her husband works with you at the Press," said Livy.

She was still dazed when they went into the house and Mrs. Chelsea greeted them distractedly, her eyes batting and her hands flying about, "Oh, what kept you so long and

where's Celeste? I'm about frantic. Dinner is ready to serve, and Rich isn't back yet, and Mrs. Prout is ready to have a tantrum if she can find the slightest excuse, and nobody knows where Florence is and I haven't been able to leave the dining room for a moment because you know how she loves to jump up on the table when it's laid for a party."

Gracia slid an arm about her.

"I knew I shouldn't have gone out. Don't fret about the cat. I'll guard the table now until we sit down. You weren't planning to change, were you, Livy?"

"No," said Livy.

The talk was remote from her, a babble in her ears. One question kept repeating itself in her mind: Why is he working at the Chelsea Press? She was afraid it might escape her lips. Her eyes were playing tricks on her; time after time as she looked from Gracia's face to Ames' to Mrs. Chelsea's, the blank white face of Charles Brittain, Carl Brittain, appeared before her eyes, superimposed on one of those other faces. A section of the past was superimposed on the present moment, confusingly mixed in with it, making no sense.

"I'll just dash up and get a clean handkerchief," she said.

She had to get away from them all long enough to stop the whirring in her head.

In the upper hall she met Serena who had put on fresh make-up and a sheer yellow dress.

"Is Rich back yet?"

"No," said Livy. "How nice you look. You make me feel unwashed."

Serena's carefully tinted lips curved into a dazzling smile. The yellow dress brought out yellow lights in her light brown eyes. Her response to admiration was as simple as a young child's. Her eyes were shallow, Livy thought, but agreeably innocent. They hid nothing. Different from the

stony blankness of Carl's blue eyes, which concealed and rejected.

In Gracia's room she closed the door and gave herself a moment to collect her wits.

Carl Brittain was a member of the Chelsea family. He was Ames' brother-in-law. He worked in the Press with Ames. That much she knew, and she wasn't supposed to know more. He had refused to acknowledge previous acquaintance with her.

Very well, she thought. If that's the way he wants it. Very well. I can't force him to admit that once he loved me. Perhaps he never did. But if he didn't, why should he hate me now? Perhaps I dealt his masculine pride a mortal wound, leaving him as I did. It's usually the man who makes the break.

That explanation cleared her head and changed her bewildered hurt into defiance. If he is petty and vindictive enough to hold that sort of grudge against me for so long, she thought, then I can be quite ruthless in any dealings I have with him from now on. I needn't consider his feelings at all, but only my own, and Ames'.

She had to have an explanation, and that one would serve. But it wasn't a very satisfactory one. Because, she thought forlornly, how could I have loved a petty and vindictive man so much? How could I?

Downstairs the family was waiting for her. She couldn't stay here by herself, searching for an explanation that only Carl could give her. What had she come upstairs for? A handkerchief. She stepped to the bed where her suitcase lay open. Inside the case, on a swirl of underwear and stockings and clean handkerchiefs, lay Florence, sleeping sweetly, her fluffy tail over her nose.

"Listen, you," said Livy.

The white cat lifted her head and yawned, displaying a fine set of needle-sharp teeth and a rough pink petal of tongue.

"Move, will you?" said Livy.

She stretched a hand out. A white paw darted, and needle-sharp claws raked her wrist. Florence spat and sprang to the rug and up again to the other bed where she settled herself in a nest of small lacy pillows.

"Livy?" called Ames from the foot of the stairs.

"Coming!" said Livy.

She said, "I hope your cat keeps her fingernails clean," showing the bloody scratches.

"I told you not to touch her," said Ames.

Whatever happened, she thought, even cat scratches, he blamed her, even when she was the one who suffered.

"If I had a cat like that," she said, nursing her wrist, "I'd call her by another name. I think I'd call her Cytherea."

"Sit here," said Ames, pulling out a chair.

The oblong table was laid with coffee-colored lace mats. Two yellow roses, full blown, floated in a shallow bowl of amber glass. Livy sat at Ames' right, with an empty chair beside her, Serena across from her and Gracia next to Serena, who said plaintively, as Ames ladled cream soup from a blue and white tureen, "I'm worried about Rich. I'm worried sick. He's never late for meals. Food is terribly important to him. He may have been in an accident. He may have been run over. Do you think we should call the hospital?"

"They'd have called us," said Gracia. "Everybody in town knows Rich by sight."

"If a car struck Rich," said Ames, "it would bounce off into a ditch and he'd stop to pick it up and set it back on the road. Maybe that's what's kept him."

"Perhaps he had to go back to the School," suggested Mrs.

Chelsea. "Arrangements about the track meet or something."

"Oh, Aunt, the track season's over," said Serena. "Everything's over, almost. Exams begin on Wednesday. The boys go home week after next."

She looked ready to cry. Gracia said soothingly, "It can't have been bad news in the telegram because he was tremendously excited and happy."

"What telegram?" cried Serena. "You didn't say anything about a telegram! You said there was a phone call from the School."

"A telegram came to the School for Rich after you left this noon," said Gracia, "and it was phoned through to him here about four."

"You didn't tell me!" Serena wailed, and her dropped spoon made a tiny clatter against her plate. "Why didn't you tell me?"

A lot of fuss about nothing, Livy thought. But some people are like that about telegrams. Mother was.

There was a thud and crunch of running feet on the gravel outside, and Serena cried, "There he is now! Oh, darling, where have you been?"

The whole house quivered as Rich crashed into the hall. He was panting and red in the face. The biggest young man Livy had seen in years. Bigger than Hank. As tall and broad as her father. Not fat, but all muscle and bone and thick bright spectacles and toothy grin.

"Sorry to be late, Aunt Bethy," he panted, touching Mrs. Chelsea's arm with a big gentle finger. He bent to kiss Serena's cheek and said, "Sorry, honey. I looked everywhere for you," as he went past to take the chair by Livy. When Ames presented him to her, she was included in the wide ecstatic grin, and she thought, He's tight. He must be. Or maybe he isn't. Maybe he's just drunk on happiness and ex-

citement the way I was on the train coming to Hotchkiss.

Three hours ago and a little more, she had felt like that. Too happy to heed the recurrent warning, the nagging reminder that somewhere in this part of the state was a town she had heard of and never seen, a four corners, a ghost village with a name out of Shakespeare. She had tried to remember the name, but she hadn't had any real qualms.

"Oh, Rich, what was the telegram?" asked Serena.

His voice was high-pitched with excitement, "Honey, what's the best news you can think of? Superlative news?"

Livy turned to look at him. Why, he's only a kid, she thought. A nice exuberant kid.

His cheeks were round and red, his eyes bright pin points behind his glasses, his hair, sun-bleached to the color of tow, was too long on top and wild. His head jutted forward as if he thought stretching his neck would help out his defective sight.

Mrs. Chelsea plucked at his sleeve.

"Oh, dearest, is it the salary raise you hoped for? Oh, how splendid. I'm so proud of you. You deserved it, you work so hard, all those winning teams. Now Serena can have her new winter coat with the fox. How lovely."

He sputtered with laughter as if she had said something exquisitely amusing.

"She won't need that kind of coat where we're going, Aunt Bethy. She'll need mosquito netting and insect lotion. I think you'd better cut your hair, honey, it'll be less trouble to you if it's short."

Mrs. Chelsea uttered a tiny squeak.

"But her hair is beautiful! And so unusual, the way she wears it. It sets her off from other women."

"There won't be other women where we're going, Aunt Bethy. White women, that is."

Ames said, "What is all this?"

"The expedition I spoke about to you before Uncle Jake was sick," said Rich. "I haven't mentioned it the last two years because I was terribly afraid it might never happen. He's an old man and an operation like that is a shock at any age, and I was afraid he'd never be really fit again. I guess he was afraid so, too, because last time I saw him, that was August, he was plenty discouraged and told me not to count on anything, he was probably through. But ever since then, apparently, he's been steadily gaining, and now he's raring to go. He's in New York now, making arrangements. He had plenty of time to make all the plans while he was convalescing. We're going to fly to Manáos and go from there by boat up the Rio Negro. We'll live right in the jungle for six months, anyhow, right with the Indians."

"Indians!" Mrs. Chelsea gave a faint shriek.

"Six months," said Serena, "starting when?"

She was pale but unexcited. Her eyes never left her husband's face.

"Week after next," he said, "if things go the way Uncle Jake hopes. You and I are to join him in New York next week."

"Classes aren't over yet."

"They nearly are, and Pop Upham will let me off the final conferences on grades. He knows how long I've counted on this trip and he likes Uncle Jake well enough to make allowances for my leaving in such a rush."

"That's awfully short notice," was all she said.

"Well, he wrote me two months ago, he says, but I never got the letter. Isn't it funny, it's always the most important letters that go astray? Bills and advertisements always reach you. He didn't expect an answer. He was just giving me advance warning so that I could hand in my resignation to

Pop. And it doesn't matter, because Pop can fill my job easily. And we don't need much time to get ready, honey, do we? We can pick up what we need in New York."

"Where's Manáos?" asked Livy. "Brazil?"

"But you can't take Serena!" wailed Mrs. Chelsea, wringing her hands.

He said, "Why, Aunty, you don't think I'd go without her? She's going to be awfully useful. Uncle Jake was doubtful about taking a woman along, but I told him what a marvelous sport Serena is, and how sturdy she is, and how quick at picking up a language, much quicker than I am, and she can make friends with the women and get all sorts of data from them."

"But she was planning to spend the summer here, Rich!"

"Aunty, Serena and I have looked forward to this expedition ever since before we were married, before we were engaged, even. It means every bit as much to her as it does to me. She may not be an anthropologist, but she's the wife of one. Her whole heart's in this expedition, the same as mine is."

"But why do you have to go in such a hurry?" whimpered Mrs. Chelsea. "Why can't you spend a nice quiet summer here and then go in the autumn when it's cooler and you're rested?"

He said patiently, "We have to take advantage of the dry season, Aunt Bethy. It starts in July. If Uncle Jake isn't satisfied with the material we get in six months, we may stay down there through the rainy season, in one of the coast cities, where we can be reasonably comfortable, and then go in again a year from now."

"I thought you liked your teaching position, Rich. You have that nice little suite in the dormitory, and you're near enough to come home for week ends."

"It was only a fill-in job, Aunty, something to get married

on, something to feed us till I could get a position in my own field or go on this expedition. I hope to get a book out of this trip, and Serena will help me to write it. It's our hope for the future, Auntie. If the book is good, it may lead to a university position later on. I don't want to be a games and history master all my life, and Serena doesn't want me to."

"But it will be dangerous, Rich. There'll be snakes. You know Serena is afraid of snakes."

"I'll take care of her, Aunt Bethy. It isn't any more dangerous than living right here, if you know the ropes, and Uncle Jake does; he's been down twice before and all he got was malaria."

"Darling," said Serena, "help Ames change the plates. You know Mrs. Prout won't wait on table when we have company."

She's remarkably composed, thought Livy. I misjudged her. I took her for a well-built clotheshorse with nothing in her sleek head but patterns for dresses. Serena, I apologize.

She smiled across the table.

"Serena, I'd give almost anything to be in your shoes."

Provided Ames could wear your husband's shoes. What heaven if Ames and I were starting off together on such an adventure, leaving relatives and complications behind us. What heaven.

"You're interested in anthropology?" inquired Serena, her voice a little flat.

"I'm interested in man," said Livy. "Not so much in the science of. But I'd love to go on a trip like the one you're planning. I like going to strange places, seeing strange people. What fun you're going to have, you two."

Serena's long straight golden lashes flickered, and her creamy eyelids dropped. Hard to imagine her living for six months in the jungle. Her hair looked as if she had spent

an hour on it. Her shoulders were creamy and smooth, showing through the thin yellow stuff of her dress. The slip was cut so low in front that the curve of her low round breasts showed plainly. She appeared created for decorative and amorous purposes only, yet she must have courage and stamina and plenty of spunk or Rich wouldn't be planning to take her on such a trip. She would be too much of a liability. She might fold up at the end of a week of hardships. She could wreck the whole expedition.

"Your wife must be a good sport," Livy said when Rich returned to the chair beside her.

"She is," he said. "There's nobody like her."

The tone of his voice, the way he looked at his wife and the way she looked back at him, made Livy's heart tremble.

"I envy you two," she said, "from the marrow of my bones."

They had everything. They knew each other, they trusted each other, they loved each other. They had been married long enough to be completely sure of each other.

I wish things were settled between Ames and me, she thought wistfully. I wish we'd been married three years, and were sure of each other. I could do without adventure if I could only be sure that he feels about me the way I feel about him and that nothing could spoil it. If I could know that, I'd be perfectly happy to live right in this town for the rest of my life, right in this house with his mother, if necessary, even with Carl Brittain practically in our back yard. If I could be sure of Ames' love, I wouldn't even mind about Carl being in the family. I could deal with Carl somehow.

"I don't understand what made you so late getting home, Rich," Serena said. "You got the phone call and went to Dakin's to find me, and then what?"

"I rang doorbells all over Hotchkiss," he said, "anywhere

I thought you might be. I wanted to tell you first, before I tried to reach Uncle Jake. But finally I stopped in at the Farnsworths' and Archie was there alone and I was ready to burst with wanting to tell my news and I knew he'd be interested. Do you mind my having told him first, honey?"

"Of course I don't mind."

"So then I used his phone to reach Uncle Jake. I didn't want to do my phoning from here because it took a long time to get in touch with Uncle Jake, I had to chase him over half of New York, and I knew you had company and I didn't want to make a nuisance of myself, and by the time I got hold of Uncle Jake it was nearly seven and I ran all the way here."

"Indians," moaned Mrs. Chelsea.

He put a big hand on her shoulder and she quaked, shuddering all over as if a mastodon had breathed down her neck.

"You'll be scalped."

"Aunty, they don't. They aren't that sort of Indians."

"They may eat you."

He was frankly shocked, not at the idea of cannibalism but at her abysmal ignorance.

"Aunt Bethy, you're all mixed up. The Tarianos don't eat human flesh."

"They'll burn you at the stake. They'll put your heads on poles and dry them. I've been terrified of Indians ever since I was a tiny girl and Father read Cooper aloud."

There was a bloodcurdling screech from the kitchen and Mrs. Chelsea flung out both hands, her goblet of water went flying, and she fell back in her chair, blue-white. The kitchen door flew open to admit Mrs. Prout.

"That varmint!" she shouted. "I'll wring her neck! I told you to keep her out of my kitchen, Mr. Ames! I can't do nothing with her under my feet!"

She was tiny, the size of Mrs. Chelsea, but thinner, her face shriveled and brown, her eyes small and snapping black under bushy black brows, her glossy hair, black almost to purple and obviously dyed, pinned high in a flat tight circle.

"The cat?" said Ames. "I'll catch her, Mrs. Prout."

"It ain't no use now!" she snapped, but in a kind of bitter triumph, her skinny muscular arms folded against her flat waist. "You won't get no dessert. Them pies was on the shelf and she walked in them. She's under the stove now, lapping herself."

The door swung to, with violence, behind her, and Ames bent double in his chair, convulsed. But his mother was shaking all over. She whispered, "Will you excuse me? That scream. I thought it was Indians."

"We'll have to make do with crackers and cheese," said Gracia. "You get them, will you, Ames?"

She put an arm around Mrs. Chelsea and helped her into the living room.

Rich said, "Ames, have you got a map of Brazil? Even an old atlas will do. I want to show you where we're going."

When the map was produced he pushed back forks and goblets and coffee-colored lace.

"Look," he said. "Honey, come here."

Serena rose instantly and he hugged her against his side with one thick arm.

"See that wiggly line, honey?"

"Yes, Rich."

He traced it with his index finger.

"The Amazon," he said.

Livy was touched by the reverence in his voice. It was as if he said, "The Promised Land" or "The Holy Grail."

"Think of it, honey. We're really going. After all those months when Uncle Jake was so sick and you'd watch the

mail and rush out between classes to tell me if there was any news about him and finally we gave up hope of his ever getting well enough to go on with the plan, and we even stopped talking about it because we knew we might be stuck at the Upham School for life and we'd better not hope for what we could never have. And now we're actually going. We're going together. I've dreamed of going on an expedition into that country ever since I was knee-high, listening to Uncle Jake tell about his experiences there. I made up my mind when I was knee-high to be an anthropologist like Uncle Jake. Oh, Serena!"

He kissed her, hard, and bent to the map again, scooping a great handful of crackers from the dish just beyond it, and munching them while he talked, "Here's Manáos and I think he plans to assemble our outfit there but I'm not quite sure. We have to get porters and canoemen and a cook. We'll have to get a boat that will take us along the Rio Negro about to here. That's Yawarete, one of the chief homes of the Tarianos."

He went on talking and eating until he had finished the whole dish of crackers, devoured all the cheese, and stowed away the last salted almond, and the table looked as if a swarm of locusts had passed over it, and Ames said, "Come on. Coffee."

The tray stood in front of Mrs. Chelsea, but she was still too tremulous to pour so Gracia did it.

"It seems chilly," sighed Mrs. Chelsea plaintively. "Will you touch a match to the fire, Richmond?"

The little flames shot up, blue and orange and green, and the fan of folded paper curled and blackened and fell into ash as the smaller sticks of wood caught smokily. Rich squatted on his heels with his back to the fire, his map folded lovingly under one arm, a coffee cup balanced in the palm

of his hand.

He's completely happy, thought Livy. He hasn't a doubt. He hasn't a pang. Everything's settled for him, his love, his work, the coming year.

It was wonderful to see anyone so completely happy and so secure.

Celeste's clear colorless voice spoke through the screen, "They're just having coffee, Charles," and Livy put down her cup and sat up, bracing herself.

"We can only stay a minute," Celeste announced as she came in. "Livy, you've already met my husband, haven't you?" and Livy looked eagerly into his eyes but they were blank and cold. "You were in my living room when he came home, weren't you? He's frightfully tired and we must get to bed early, but we had to run over just long enough to say 'Congratulations.' "

She crossed directly to Serena.

"My dear, what wonderful news. I'm so happy for you. I know how thrilled you both must be. You've waited so long and hoped without saying a word about it, but I knew how you both must be feeling about it."

Rich said, "Who told you? My God, the way news gets around this town. Did Archie tell you? He said he'd keep it quiet."

Celeste said, "Why, Beulah let it slip. She thought I knew or she wouldn't have mentioned it. She took it for granted that the family knew. I ran over to see her about the Red Cross meeting tomorrow and she said wasn't it nice about Serena and how surprised she was when Serena came into Dr. Cheney's office. You mustn't blame her for speaking about it, Serena. She's the most discreet person. A nurse has to be. But she thought you'd be so proud and excited you'd

want everyone to know, and of course before long everyone will know whether you tell it or not, though it doesn't show yet. How far along are you, my dear? When's the baby coming?"

6

AMES had risen from the sofa as his sister entered and Rich still had his back to the fireplace so that the two stood almost shoulder to shoulder. Both looked at Serena, but Gracia was watching Ames as she usually did when he was within sight, and she saw his arm reach out to the younger man. He gave Rich a quick light thump on the back and grasped his shoulder in what might have been mistaken for friendly congratulation. It wasn't, Gracia knew. It was reassurance; it was sympathy; it said what couldn't be uttered aloud before the Brittains, or before Serena, God pity you, man; you're trapped; this wrecks your plans.

Rich asked in a strangled voice, "Is it true, honey?" and Celeste said, "For mercy's sake, Serena, do you mean you haven't told your own husband?"

Serena flung herself at Rich and his arms lifted, as if from habit, to hold her against him, but loosely, weakly, as if his strength had been cut off at the source. She clung to him, sobbing.

"I didn't want to say anything until I was sure! It could have been a false alarm! I didn't know for certain myself till this afternoon, and I haven't seen you alone for a moment since, Rich, you were so late getting back, and I didn't want just to blurt it out before everybody at the dinner table."

"Don't cry, honey," he said.

Elspeth had struggled up, her little face working like mad, her hands fairly beating the air.

"Oh, Serena, dearest! Oh, Richmond, my dear boy! Oh, I'm so happy for you!"

She attempted to take both of them into her arms.

"Oh, you're going to be so happy about this, both of you, when you get used to the idea. You won't mind what it means giving up. A baby is the most important thing in life. It's worth every sacrifice. It makes the whole of life different."

"No doubt about that," muttered Ames with such bitterness that Gracia turned a little cold. There were times, and this was one of them, she realized painfully, when he became wholly male, antagonistic to all women, setting his face against them all, even his mother, even herself. Even, for the moment, perhaps, Livy?

She glanced at Livy and was surprised to see how pale she was, and how rigidly she stood as if bracing herself against attack.

She must be very much in love with him, thought Gracia, if she can sense his change of mood so quickly. But perhaps it isn't that. Perhaps she's only feeling sorry for Rich.

Livy found a cigarette in the silver box beside her, and reached for a match. Gracia saw that her long-fingered strong-looking hands were shaking. Now that was odd. That was extremely odd. She seemed too hearty and thick-skinned a girl to be deeply moved by a stranger's grief and frustration. Because Rich was a stranger to her. They were all strangers to her except Ames.

Before she could light the match, Charles had offered his lighter, and she said, "Thanks," without looking at him, her voice a little roughened and too loud.

"I don't understand what you're crying about, Serena,"

Celeste's impersonal voice was like a dash of cold water and served the same purpose. It checked the sobs. Serena turned about, her wet face resentful, her lower lip thrust out.

"You planned this baby, didn't you?" asked Celeste.

Serena's golden lashes, caught together with tears, stood out around her eyes like the points of stars. In spite of her pout she looked appealing and very pretty. She hadn't cried enough to make her unsightly. Gracia recalled occasional storms of weeping that had upset the entire household when Serena was younger; there hadn't been any since the marriage to Rich.

I hope this isn't the start of a long wet week end, Gracia thought. We shall have enough stress and strain without that.

"Of course we didn't plan it!" said Serena. "We wanted to wait until we had more money. There's plenty of time. We're only twenty-five, both of us."

"I thought you must be saving for a baby," said Celeste, "buying your clothes at sales the way you do and driving that old rattletrap roadster year after year. I know Rich doesn't make much; private schools underpay atrociously; but cheap clothes and cheap cars that may fall apart any time are no real economy. And if this baby is an accident, I can only say I've no patience with you. There is only one really foolproof method of prevention, and if you take chances, you must expect accidents. I don't mean to say that you're fools, but it's foolish to take a chance and then cry after you're caught. How far along are you?"

"Only two months," Serena was defensive.

"And you haven't said a word to Rich till now? I don't see how you could keep it to yourself this long."

"But I wasn't sure, I tell you!"

"Why didn't you consult the School doctor?"

Serena's soft chin jerked up.

"I wouldn't for anything! He's young and I play bridge with him every single week. I simply couldn't go to him about anything so personal when I'm meeting him socially all the time. I don't mind Dr. Cheney so much. I'm used to him and he's old."

Celeste's trill of laughter was patronizing.

"You'll soon get over being so sensitive!"

Ames said, "Celeste, for God's sake, shut up," as he had been saying at frequent intervals ever since Gracia had first met the Chelseas. He turned his back squarely on his sister. He said, "Livy, I didn't realize that you had met Charles before. You didn't say so."

"Didn't I?" said Livy. "He was pretty much surprised, I imagine, when he looked into his own living room and there I was, making myself at home."

Ames said, "Oh, Charles is never surprised at finding his house occupied by strange women. Celeste is always having committee meetings and benefit card parties and whatnot. I don't see how he stands it. It would drive me crazy."

Elsbeth had drawn Serena to the sofa and was patting the girl's hand and crooning to her.

"Dearest, spend the whole summer with us. Gracia will love to help you with the sewing. My crippled old hands won't be any good to you but it will be fun for me to sit and watch you making lovely little things for the baby."

Celeste said, "I can let you have shirts and nightgowns, Serena. Phyllis grew so fast that she simply burst out of her first things and they're hardly worn at all. I bought the very best quality so they're as good as new."

"I'd rather make everything myself," said Serena crossly.

She oughtn't to pout like that, thought Gracia, watching her profile. She wouldn't if she knew how it looks from the side.

It was a rather insignificant profile at best, far less attractive than the girl's full face. The nose was too small, though pretty enough, tip-tilted, and the chin was too soft, not actually retreating but without character. The gold thread of eyebrow was almost invisible. She had given up using eyebrow pencil because Rich didn't like it.

They adore each other, thought Gracia. It's a cruel shame they can't have their expedition adventure and their baby, too. It's a cruel shame when the coming of a baby means bitter disappointment instead of rejoicing.

Rich was moving unobtrusively toward the front door, and Serena cried out forlornly, "Rich, where are you going?" as if she were being deserted. He glanced back, placating but a little desperate. He said, "I have to reimburse Archie for all those long distance calls. I didn't have any cash on me this afternoon."

He went out, moving very quietly for so big a man.

"The poor devil," said Ames under his breath. Gracia saw him grimace warningly at Livy as if he didn't trust her to keep her mouth shut before the Britains. If Celeste found out about the expedition and began discussing it as thoroughly as she was discussing the baby, there would certainly be more tears from Serena and then Elspeth would be in a real dither.

"Bands and diapers and shirts and gowns are all you'll need at first," Celeste was saying. "Don't make a lot of fluffy dresses because the baby won't ever wear them. You'd much better put the time into knitting for the Red Cross."

"I don't like to knit," said Serena sulkily. "It's going to be bad enough to look horrible and feel horrible without working on horrible old socks and things and thinking about the war every single minute."

"It would do you good," said Celeste, "to think more

about world affairs and less about your looks and feelings. Honestly, my dear, it isn't moral in times like these to waste hours varnishing your fingernails and brushing your hair and sewing just for yourself."

She was sitting on the other side of Elspeth, leaning across her to lay down the law, "I can let you have three very good maternity dresses left over from when I was carrying Phyllis. I shall want them back when you're through with them because they're excellent material and will last for years, so don't cut them over. You can let down the hems. I don't mind your doing that. I'm sure you can get into them because they're very large; you remember I was tremendous the last two months."

"I can't wear dresses three years out of style!" cried Serena, tormented.

"My dear, you'll forget about style when you start to bulge. You'll be thankful for anything that will cover you up. These are good inconspicuous colors, dark blue and dark brown and a very dull green."

"I loathe dark colors," said Serena. "I never wear them."

"Well, you'll look as big as a house if you wear pastels. Now let me see. You're two months along. That means the baby is due early in January. By the middle of summer you won't be able to button a thing you possess. You make your dresses far too tight in the waist and that's a mistake. I always buy my things a size too large because they wear better; the seams are less likely to give. I'll pack up a box of things for you to take back with you on Sunday. I'll put in plenty of mothballs, and remember, when you wash the wools, use lukewarm water."

Gracia tried to close her ears to that cool infuriating voice. It had a talent for killing all other conversation in a room. Ames looked ready to burst. Gracia said quickly, "It was

nice you could finish up your business, Charles, and get home ahead of time. Ames thought you might have to stay over into next week."

"It would have been a pity if he had missed the dance," said Ames with heavy irony.

He oughtn't to be sulky about the dance, thought Gracia, at least, not in front of Livy, after inviting her here for it. He needn't have asked her this week end. He knew he must go, no matter how much he dislikes dancing. Celeste would raise the roof if he stayed away. But he could have taken me. He's used to me. He knows I don't mind when he steps on my feet.

"It would have been a pity," Livy duplicated Ames' ironic inflection but she looked at Charles, "if you had missed seeing me."

"You're leaving on Monday?" asked Charles. His manner was likely to put Livy off, thought Gracia, since she wasn't used to it and couldn't know that he wasn't really bored and supercilious. "This is your first visit to Hotchkiss? How do you like the town?"

He was really making an effort to be polite, thought Gracia, to make conversation, but his listlessness counteracted the courtesy. The very way he sat in his chair, his shoulders drooping, his hands in his pockets, suggested boredom and complete indifference. To be sure, he might be genuinely weary. But he always sat that way. He always spoke that way, asking questions as if he had no faintest interest in the answers. It must be getting on Livy's nerves because her voice in answering had a forceful bluntness that sounded almost like defiance.

"I like it very much, what I've seen of it so far. I grew up in a town the size of this. Littlefield, New York. I don't suppose you ever heard of it? I don't suppose you ever knew

anyone who came from there?"

He hesitated as if he were trying to please her by recalling some name that would be familiar to her, and she said, "I always ask, because I'm always coming across people I've known, or people who've known people I've known, in the most unexpected places."

"You're living in Littlefield now?" asked Charles.

"I haven't lived there for ten years," she said. "I went back for a few weeks in the fall because my mother died, but I didn't stay long."

Ames said, "You haven't stayed long anywhere in the last ten years, have you? Chicago. San Francisco. San Diego. Kansas City. Just a rolling stone."

That had a sting in it, a tiny whiplash of mockery, and Gracia wondered if Livy felt it and saw that she did. Why on earth should he lash out at her, even so lightly? Because he was still identifying with Rich and hating all women a little? Because his sister's presence always made him irritable? Or perhaps, still identifying with Rich, who was trapped, he resented the freedom that Livy had had to go where she chose when she chose.

He's had no freedom, thought Gracia. I wonder if sometimes he feels he's been trapped. I wonder if sometimes he feels that his mother and I are an intolerable burden.

"I'm not a rolling stone," said Livy. Her defiance had left her. She was plainly distressed.

If she loves him, thought Gracia, she's in a tough spot. She can't very well say outright, "I want to marry you and stay here forever," when he hasn't asked her to stay. And he won't. I'm certain he won't.

"I haven't always left places because I wanted to," said Livy, crushing out her cigarette and lighting another. She was smoking too much and she was heedless about where

the ashes fell. The surface of the piecrust table beside her was filmed with gray ash. Ames wouldn't like that. He detested a messy smoker. "Sometimes things just happen. Sometimes you find yourself in a situation so painful that you just have to pick up and leave, because to stay would make you abominably unhappy, but sometimes leaving makes you unhappy, too."

"Most of us can't just pick up and walk out," said Ames crisply. "Most of us have responsibilities. You, of course, have never had any."

It was almost as if he wanted to quarrel with her. He was like that at times. But never with me, thought Gracia. Not with his mother and never with me. Yet when he speaks of responsibilities, I suppose he means us.

The thought made her agonizingly uncomfortable.

Livy looked uncomfortable, too, twisting restlessly about in the white leather chair that was too low for her long legs. She didn't fit the chair and she didn't fit the room. Her red suit was a screaming discord in the midst of the carefully blended pale colors of woodwork and walls and upholstery. Her personality was a discord in the household. Ames might find her exciting but he had been in a bad state of nerves ever since her arrival. Ever since the long distance call, in fact.

She's bad for him, thought Gracia. It isn't merely that I want to think so. Look at him. He's never on edge like this when he's alone with his mother and me. He's comfortable with us and at peace.

But perhaps peace and comfort aren't enough for a man not yet thirty.

He isn't in love with her. Or is he, a little? He can't take his eyes off her. But then, neither can Charles. Bright red always catches the eye. But he never has liked it. When I was first married I had a bright red skirt and he asked me to

give it away.

"I'll let you take my pram," Celeste was saying cheerfully. "There's no point in your buying one when you have so little money. They're very expensive, the good ones. Mine was the best that could be bought. You can give it back to me when I have another baby. I wish I were starting one this summer. Phyllis is going on three and if I'm to have more children they might as well all be little together, because two are really as much work as four. But of course a family of four is a big expense. I wish the business would pick up. It did much better in Dad's time, but then he made a good profit on all those theological books, and it isn't Ames' fault that the seminary closed. With Daffy and Phyllis and my big house, I have to economize about as closely as you do, Serena, in spite of our income being three times yours. I suppose I must wait another year before I start another baby. A child is a luxury when you figure the cost of the first twenty years, from obstetrician to graduation. But don't worry too much, Serena. I can tell you ways to save. You will have to give up your suite in the dormitory, won't you, and take one of the small houses on the School grounds? They're pretty dreary, aren't they? You'll have to tend your own furnace and do your own cooking and washing. It's too bad you can't afford a maid. I've cut Roselle's pay to the bone, but of course she'd rather work for me, even without pay, than for anyone else in Hotchkiss."

Other conversation in the room, such as it was, had given up the struggle. Celeste's pronouncements were made with such calm authority that it was hard not to listen.

"If it weren't for the expense, I could have a baby this summer. I haven't been to Dr. Cheney recently but I'm sure the anemia is gone. I got through the winter without a single cold. Of course Dr. Cheney is terribly stern with me; you

know how he scolded because I had Phyllis so soon after Daffy; he worries more about me than about most of his young mothers because of my size. He was sure I'd have to have a Caesarean section both times. But you won't have any trouble, Serena, you're so wide through the hips."

Ames said, "Will you shut up, Celeste? Do you think we're interested in your personal physiology?"

"Perhaps you aren't," answered his sister without annoyance, "but Serena is. Women are always interested in the business of having babies. It's the most exciting and important part of our existence. You men don't have to listen."

"Yes, we do," said Ames. "You don't realize how penetrating your voice is."

She smiled, as if he had paid her a compliment.

"It does carry well, doesn't it? I find that such an advantage at club meetings. The acoustics in the Club auditorium aren't too good, but I find I can be heard all over the place without raising my voice. Loudness has nothing to do with it. It's clear articulation that counts. That's why Daffy speaks so much better than most children her age. She imitates my way of talking, have you noticed? Even her inflections are the same. Children are such little mimics, the intelligent ones."

She said, "Oh, Gracia, I'm going to bring the girls over to you tomorrow morning. I have two meetings and the second may last till noon and Roselle will have the cleaning on her hands."

"We haven't made our plans for tomorrow," said Ames. "Gracia may be too busy to mind your brats."

"She's never too busy to play with my babies," said Celeste. "I really feel selfish that I don't share them with you more often, Gracia. What are you going to do tomorrow, Ames? Why don't you drive out to the lake? The children

adore going out there."

She kissed her mother's temple.

"We must be going. You ought to be in bed. You look fearfully tired. Have you been having a lot of pain at night lately and losing sleep, Mother?"

Elspeth's deeply grooved upper lip seemed to grow longer, and her faded eyes blinked fast. She said eagerly, "I've been feeling particularly well!"

"Oh, you can't fool me," Celeste retorted. "You always say you feel well and I know better. You're the most obstinate little thing. Ames, why don't you side with me? Together we could make her behave."

"She behaves beautifully," said Ames.

"Oh, you know what I mean," said his sister. "I mean, about having her teeth out, all of them, every last infected one."

"They aren't infected!" wailed Elspeth, holding up both twisted hands defensively as if she expected Celeste to pull pliers from a pocket and start at once to work. "I had an x-ray of my whole mouth. There wasn't a sign of an abscess."

"You know perfectly well that an x-ray isn't infallible," said Celeste. "Abscesses don't always show, and it stands to reason that at your age your teeth can't be sound. I'm sure at least half of them are ulcerated and the poison they're discharging into your system is what makes the arthritis. I should think you'd want relief from pain even if you don't care about your looks. I hate to see your hands and ankles so misshapen; they used to be awfully trim and pretty; and heaven knows your teeth never were pretty, so uneven, and all that gold; I should think you'd be glad of a nice natural-looking set that would let you smile naturally."

She stood up.

"I'm so glad I have perfect teeth and that the children's

are likely to be perfect, although I suppose it's too soon to be absolutely sure. I think a girl's most important assets are straight legs and straight teeth. Come, Charles. I'll bring the girls over to you right after breakfast, Gracia."

When she was gone, and Charles with her, Ames slid down in his chair till he lay on the back of his neck and he let out a great whoof of relief.

"How do you suppose Charles stands her?" he groaned.

Poor Elspeth was still quivering with mortification, but her whispered protest was automatic, "Oh, dearest, you mustn't. Your own sister."

"The only thing I like about her," he said dreamily, his eyes closed, every inch of him limp and relaxed, "is the heavenly peace of this house when she's gone out of it. Listen to the silence. Isn't it lovely? Don't anyone utter a word till I raise my finger."

It was lovely, thought Gracia, watching him through her lashes, to have him relaxed and happy and even playful again. His heavy breathing, getting Celeste out of his lungs, was the only sound in the room except for the fire's tiny crackling.

It would be even lovelier, she thought, if Serena and Livy were gone, and the three of us were by ourselves as we usually are.

I suppose he'll marry sometime, she thought. I must face it. If not Livy, some other. Well, I've had three heavenly years, three whole years of almost perfect happiness. I helped him plan the house. It's really our house, his and mine. He built it to please his mother, but she left the decisions to us. She always said, "My judgment isn't reliable, but I shall love whatever you two decide upon."

What a time they had had. What frenzy. What delight. No wrangling. Only endless considering. He didn't know

what he wanted until they had tried it. He only knew, with gnashing of teeth and tearing of hair, what he didn't like, once it was installed.

It was his house. But it was hers, too. He had refused to buy so much as an ash tray without her approval. They had brought very little from the old house except his bedroom set and Elspeth's and the guest room furniture. This room and the dining room and her own bedroom held no memories of Rufus, no associations at all except the remembered happiness of choosing every item with Ames, or rather, of choosing them herself and letting him think he was choosing.

He liked what she liked, after she showed it to him. Her eyes went over the room. Her colors, her taste, her arrangement. And he loved it. He thought it was his. Theirs. The deep blue rug that Celeste had warned them would show every footprint; and it did. The peach-colored chair and the white leather chair and the pale yellow sofa. The dark old grand piano bought for a song from a friend who was moving away from town; bought because Elspeth had always wanted a grand piano although her hands were too crippled to play. Her hideous upright would have ruined the room and Celeste had been glad to keep it.

The crystal vases on the white mantel. The pastel of flowers, framed in silver. The pastel-colored flowers in the silver bowl on the console. The wallpaper, pale blue, sprinkled with stars. Celeste had told them that blue would fade, and it had. She had said it was impractical, that it wouldn't wash; and it wouldn't; it wouldn't clean even with that stuff that was like putty. Ames had tried to clean it where Daffy had rubbed a buttered muffin against the wall, and the silver stars had come off but the grease had stayed.

"My head aches," announced Serena fretfully. "I have a sharp pain running straight down from here through my

eye and into my cheek. I wonder why Rich doesn't come back. I'd like to go to bed but I never can sleep till he comes."

"Do go up, dearest," urged Elspeth. "I'll go, too."

"I wish I could think of something really unusual to wear in my hair tomorrow night."

Without opening his eyes Ames said, "Buy yourself an orchid on me. Too bad about the expedition, kid. Where you were going, you could have picked orchids off the trees."

Elspeth said, "Good night, everybody."

Ames was out of his chair in an instant, picking her up in his arms as if she were Phyllis.

I'll have to stay with Livy till he comes down again, thought Gracia. But then I'll leave them. He probably wants to be alone with her. He hasn't been, for more than a minute, since he brought her from the station.

What did they talk about when they were alone together?

Perhaps they will talk about us, when I have gone up. He will tell her about Rufus and me.

The idea was hateful. But having him tell Livy was better than having to tell Livy herself. It wasn't easy to say, "I am a cast-off wife." And if she said, "I stopped loving Rufus long before he stopped loving me," Livy wouldn't believe her. Nobody would believe it. She had never said it to anyone but Ames, and even he hadn't believed her. He had thought she was trying to save her miserable pride. She had seen pity in his eyes.

She could accept pity from him. She could take from him, gladly, whatever he chose to give her. But she didn't want pity from Livy.

"Come back here," said Ames. "Where do you think you're going? Not to bed. You know you never sleep before two in the morning. Stay where you are. What do you think

Livy came here for? To get acquainted with my family. Why don't you let her?"

He had hold of her flowered skirt. He wouldn't let her go. Her blood leaped exultantly. He didn't want to be left alone with Livy. That proved it, didn't it? That he didn't love her. Then why, in heaven's name, had he asked her here? Oh, it didn't matter why. Nothing mattered so long as he wasn't in love with her. Nothing mattered so long as he wanted the companionship to which he was accustomed.

She sank back into her chair.

7

THEY were still sitting there, talking, in front of a hearthful of ashes, when Rich came in and went up to the guest room without a word.

"It's a shame about him," said Ames. "It's a rotten, mean, filthy shame. He's had his heart set on this trip for years. It might have been just enough to give him a start in his own line. Now I suppose, with a family to support, he'll be stuck in teaching hockey and basketball and tennis for life. He likes games well enough and he likes kids well enough but he never meant to make them his life work."

"There must be teaching jobs in his field," said Livy.

"Not enough to go round. Nothing for a youngster with only two modest degrees, who hasn't done anything to distinguish himself."

She hadn't a great deal of patience with anyone who let himself remain shelved in an uncongenial job. But she reminded herself that her own case wasn't comparable to that of a man who had a wife to support and who had specialized in preparing for a particular line of work. She hadn't specialized, unless you counted that course in personnel work. She had flung herself into that to get Carl Brittain out of her mind, not because of any real interest in the work itself. The training had come in handy. She had never had any trouble getting jobs of one sort or another, perhaps because she

hadn't much cared what they were and because she had endless vitality and confidence in herself. She had never been thrown out of a job. She had walked out under her own power, as she had this morning, and always walked into better ones later on.

How very long ago this morning was. Another life.

She looked across at Ames, and she thought, Something has happened to my confidence since I jumped off the train and he held his hand out to me as if I were a stranger. I'm not sure of him. I love him and I want to marry him. But I don't know whether he wants me or not. Perhaps he doesn't yet know himself.

The uncertainty about him and the unpleasantness of finding Carl Brittain in the Chelsea family had done something to her self-confidence and her vitality. She was confused and she was tired; she, who hardly knew the meaning of fatigue.

"Rich isn't the first man who's trained for a special job and had to switch over to something else," she said. "I know, I used to know, a man who had his heart set on surgery, who'd fixed his mind on that one profession from the time he was six years old carving up rag dolls with a kitchen knife, who was almost through medical school and had made a good record, nothing dazzling but perfectly sound; he had no dependents; his internship was arranged for; everything was all set. He gave it all up and went into business. And I don't know why. I lost touch with him so I don't know. Why would he?"

"Maybe he wasn't as good as you thought he was."

"He was very able. Not brilliant, but sound."

"Perhaps he married a rich wife who wanted him with her. Doctors' wives lead a pretty tough life, I guess, mostly solitude."

"He wouldn't have given up his profession for any woman on earth," she said positively.

"Maybe he got in a jam; performed an illegal operation and was caught, or sewed up a patient with the scissors inside or one of those sponges."

"Oh, nonsense," said Livy.

"Well, it does happen, doesn't it? I heard about it somewhere when I was ten and had to have my appendix out, and I was scared silly. The only sponges I knew about were the kind Dad used in his bath. After the operation I was afraid to drink liquids in case I had a bath sponge inside me that might start swelling and bust me wide open."

She laughed a little, but feebly.

He said, "You look fagged, my dear. Come along, girls. We might as well go up."

So her state of mind was showing, was it? Because her fatigue, of course, was only her state of mind. She hadn't done anything to make her tired. A whole day of sitting.

At Gracia's door he bade them both a debonair good night.

If he had kissed me, thought Livy, peeling off her clothes, I wouldn't feel so depressed. But I suppose he wouldn't kiss me in front of her. He deliberately withholds reassurance, even the most perfunctory kind, like a casual good-night kiss. Yet he's tender enough with his mother, carrying her upstairs in his arms. He's affectionate with Gracia. At least in manner, and he seems to want her around all the time. If she's out of the room, he goes and hunts her up; if she wants to leave us alone, he catches hold of her skirt and makes her stay.

Doesn't he want to be alone with me? He seemed to like it well enough six weeks ago.

Perhaps he's determined that nothing between us shall be

made definite until he sees how I get on with his family. That would explain why he invited me here instead of coming to me.

He needn't think I want to trap him.

She got into bed and threw the pillow on the floor. She lay flat, stretching herself out long, staring up at the ceiling. It seemed very low, low enough to push down on her forehead as soon as the lights went out. The room was too small. The twin beds made it seem small. But it was Gracia's room, and she wasn't very large.

There's nothing wrong with the size of the room, Livy thought. The trouble is with me. I'm too big for it. I wish I could sleep out on the front lawn with only the sky for a ceiling.

Gracia came back from the bathroom. Her ash-blond hair hung loose, halfway down her narrow back. It was brittle and dry-looking, with no shine to it. Its loose waves made her face smaller and more pinched instead of making it look younger and softer. Her dressing gown of thin white silk had clusters of faded purple violets printed on it at wide intervals. The length of it, and the wide sash, made her appear taller and infinitely more fragile than she had looked in the full, short-skirted organdy dress. She sat down at the dressing table and began to rub cold cream into her face and neck.

How old was she, anyway? How much older than Ames? There was a certain old-maid precision about her, a certain rigidity and lack of warmth, that suggested the unmarried late thirties, though she didn't look it.

Suddenly the clear child-voice of Daffy sounded in Livy's ear: "Mumma's thirty. Gracia's twenty-nine. So's Uncle Ames. Gumma's a hundred."

Why, how queer, thought Livy. I heard her say it this afternoon without really hearing it. I was attending to her but

not to what she said.

"You and Ames are the same age, Gracia?"

"I'm two months older than he is," Gracia screwed the top back on the cold cream jar. "Did you think I was his own sister? I'm not. I'm his sister-in-law. I'm a Chelsea only by marriage."

His favorite sister. The one in the family he was closest to. And she wasn't a sister.

Livy picked up the pillow and doubled it under her head. She wasn't going to sleep until some things were explained. She felt as if the air were full of cobwebs. She couldn't see them but they brushed unpleasantly against her face, they wrapped about her, offering no resistance, yet she couldn't get free of them. They clung.

"I was married to Ames' older brother Rufus for two years. We were divorced five years ago. I feel as you do about an able-bodied childless ex-wife accepting alimony. I didn't want to take it, but Rufus' father made me. He was quite a stern old man; he thought that Rufus ought to be punished; I suppose he thought that being required to pay me a fixed amount at regular intervals would be a perpetual reminder to Rufus that he had injured me. He didn't consider what it would keep reminding me of, that accepting money from a man who no longer loved me and whom I no longer loved might be a bitter humiliation to me. He hadn't much imagination. Neither had Rufus."

"So that," said Livy, "is what caused the terrible silence when I went into my song and dance about Hank and his wives. Pete's sake, why didn't Ames warn me?"

"It's exceedingly difficult for them to talk about Rufus," said Gracia. "It was a terrible row, the first breach in a closely knit family, a town scandal; you know what a scandal of that sort is like in a town like this. It wasn't just the di-

voiced and his getting tired of me; it was worse than that. He fell in love with a Hotchkiss girl, a friend of Celeste's, married to a friend of his, so her marriage smashed up along with mine. She had two small children. It was all dreadful, the kind of thing Hotchkiss couldn't excuse, the kind of thing Rufus' father couldn't forgive. He threw Rufus out of the business and out of the family. It nearly killed Aunt Bethy; I'm certain it shortened the life of my father-in-law; terrible rages do, don't they?"

Her back was still toward Livy. It was impossible, from the bed, to see her face reflected in the glass. It was impossible to tell, from her gentle even voice, how deeply the ruin of her marriage had affected her.

Was I fooled about you! thought Livy, amazed. Why, my judgment isn't worth two pins. I thought you were his old maid sister, the one who was left at home, the one men never had noticed. The nicest ones are often overlooked and left at home to be a companion to an aging parent and to manage the housekeeping for an unmarried brother.

"How could you bear to go on living here, Gracia? Even though you're fond of your in-laws and they're obviously devoted to you, how could you endure living here with them after all that?"

"They wanted me to stay. Perhaps they thought they could make it up to me. They're the only family I have. I had no other place I wanted to go. I'm not very brave. I'm not adventurous like you, liking to go to strange places and see new people. I send down roots and I want to stay in one place with people I'm used to."

That's all very well, thought Livy, appalled. But to stay on with his family after that kind of upheaval, to live on in this town where she came as a bride, to be pitied by everyone as a cast-off wife, why, she must be as tough as twine for

all she looks like tissue paper. I'm reasonably tough, but I couldn't take it.

"The Chelseas were wonderful to me from the day I first came here," said Gracia. "They made me feel one of them, like an own daughter, an own sister. While the marriage lasted, Rufus and I lived right with the family in the old house you saw this afternoon, where Celeste lives now. I was happier than I'd ever dreamed I could be. I was part of a family life I'd dreamed about but never had. I felt at home as I never did with the aunts who brought me up. I had no brothers and sisters and cousins of my own, and marriage into the Chelsea family gave them to me. Aunt Bethy and I loved each other at sight. She's happier with me than with her own daughter; she's a little afraid of Celeste; you can see how she might be. When the trouble broke wide open, and Father Chelsea threw Rufus out, and Aunt Bethy collapsed, she clung to me. The whole family took my side against Rufus. I cut him off from them and from the town he grew up in; he's settled in Iowa now, remarried, making a living in feed and fuel. He's written Aunt Bethy twice a year since his father died, but he's never been back. He can't come back while I'm here. He was terribly fond of this town and fond of his family, and everyone thought he was wonderful, till the scandal broke. Now, if he came back to Hotchkiss, if I weren't here, even if the family accepted him again, the town wouldn't; he might be cut by old friends in the street. And I'm the cause. But I never meant to be. I never wished him harm. I didn't want him punished."

She straightened the silver-backed brush and comb and hand glass. She moved a perfume bottle an inch to the left. She rose and slipped off her dressing gown and laid it across the foot of her bed, a sheaf of violets and thin white silk. In her long white lace-topped nightgown, bare-armed, with

98

her hair hanging loose, she looked like a slender young girl, all but her face. With all traces of make-up creamed away and a film of tissue cream left glistening about the eyes, her face, all fine small bones and ashen skin and shadows, was curiously ageless and inexpressive. It hadn't the unformed immature softness of a young girl's face; it was crystallized, but into what? Not grief, thought Livy. Concealment.

Like Carl Brittain's. But it was more alive than his. It was appealing. It was guarded, but not aloof.

I wish I didn't have to keep thinking about him. He has no business haunting me like a bad conscience. I never injured him, or, if I did, I never meant to, any more than Gracia meant to injure Rufus.

"Was he attractive, Gracia? Was he like Ames? Rufus, I mean."

"Oh, much more so. Handsomer, more spectacular, always more popular."

"More popular than Ames?"

"Be careful. He'll hear you. His bed is right against that wall."

"He couldn't mind hearing me say he's attractive."

"He'd mind hearing himself compared with Rufus. He got fed up on that while he was growing up. Any younger brother would."

"Wait," said Livy, as Gracia reached toward the bedside lamp. "Leave it on a minute. I want to speak to him before I sleep."

She doubled up her fist and thumped the wall.

"Ames! Ames, can you hear me? Come in here a minute."

"Heavens," said Gracia, "everyone in the house will hear you."

"Let them," said Livy, sitting up in bed. "They'd hear me just as much if I tiptoed into his room by stealth, and

they'd think far more."

The door opened and he stalked in, looking angry, his brown hair ruffled, a dark red dressing gown flung on over his striped pajamas, the fringed ends of the untied sash trailing behind him.

"What goes on? Nightmares already? I didn't suppose you'd had time to go to sleep, the way you two were gabbling. I was getting ready to bang on the wall with my slipper to make you pipe down."

"Shut the door," said Livy.

He hesitated. Then he went back to the door and closed it, catching his sash in it. Swearing, he had to go back again and open it to release himself.

Gracia, huddled in the other bed, had clutched the violet blanket up to her chin. Her eyes were apprehensive.

Pete's sake, thought Livy. You'd know she grew up with a couple of aunts, and they can't have been much like my Aunt Min, either. You'd know she never had a brother who barged into her room after a late date to sit on the foot of her bed and eat apples and gossip. What's the matter with her? She looks all right in a nightgown.

But of course Ames wasn't her brother.

"Now look here," he was saying impatiently, "I want some sleep even if you don't, Livy."

"Sit down," she said. "Sit down. I'm about to give you hell. Why didn't you warn me ahead of time about Gracia's divorce? You let me make all those breaks this afternoon before her and before your mother."

"Well, my God," he said, "how was I to know you'd burst into a diatribe on divorce before you'd been inside the house an hour?"

"I didn't start it," she said.

"I did," said Gracia, "asking about the Hallams."

"You should have warned me," said Livy. "What was the good of asking me to be careful what I said and did before your mother without giving me the faintest hint about what sort of thing I shouldn't do and say? I saw the expression on your mother's face this afternoon. Completely horrified, and it made me sore because I thought she was shocked about Hank's having married three times. Now I can see that she had every right to be horrified, and Gracia, too; and if Gracia weren't a remarkably tolerant broad-minded girl, she might hold what I said against me in spite of my having said it in all innocence. As for your mother, she's probably prejudiced against me for good and all, because how can I explain my innocence to her when nobody in your family is willing to discuss the scandal? It must have been very unpleasant for Gracia to have to tell me the whole thing herself. She ought to be even madder at you than I am."

He had undoubtedly been saying these very things to himself and blaming himself and feeling guilty, which made him furious when she accused him. He fell back on bluster, exactly the way Hank used to.

"It won't help matters any to start an argument in the middle of the night and keep everybody in the house awake."

He knotted the sash of his dressing gown so fiercely tight about his lean hard waist that she thought the silk must split. His slippers were so worn that there were whitish spots on the black leather toes. His naked ankles were very bony. He had never looked more attractive to her. She had never loved him so completely. She wanted to leap from the bed and wind her arms about him and press her face against him and hold on tight. She wanted to cry to him, "We love each other and nothing else matters and nobody else matters. We do love each other, don't we? Don't we?"

But she only glared at him and he glared back.

"You're mean," she said, blurting it out childishly, exactly as if he were Hank, and he stopped scowling. He didn't actually smile but she knew he wanted to from the way his mouth dented in at the corners. His eyes upon her were suddenly bright and amused, and more than that. Intent, as they hadn't been today, but as she well remembered their intentness and brightness when he wanted to make love to her.

He sat down on the foot of her bed.

"You're on my feet," she said.

"Move your feet."

He had forgotten that Gracia was in the room. She knew he had. He was aware of her and only of her. Gracia might as well have dissolved into thin air. Only she hadn't. She was huddled there in the other bed, the blanket modestly drawn up to her chin, her apprehensive eyes watching.

"That's a nice color on you, Livy."

"What, this?" she looked down at her yellow pajama coat. "Long-sleeved winter ones and I'm still in them because the spring has been so damp and cold."

She rolled the long sleeves up above her elbows.

"I like you in yellow. It makes your eyes look even blacker and bigger than they are."

"So does red," she said stubbornly. "Red does more for me. It's my best color. If you don't like red, why do you wear a red dressing gown?"

"This is maroon."

"It's red."

He laughed.

"Did you bring that yellow dress for the dance tomorrow night? The one you had on at the Hallams' when I first saw you? It had long full sleeves. I liked it."

"It's at the cleaner's," she said. "I had a little accident last

time I wore it. I sat in a plate of hors d'oeuvre."

"Oh, for God's sake!" he exclaimed. "Who but you would do a thing like that? Why can't you look before you sit? Who do you think you are? Victoria?"

"Now, there!" she said indignantly. "There! No matter what sort of trouble I get into, you blame me for it without even waiting to find out whether it was my fault. Why don't you ask why some idiot put a plate of hors d'oeuvre down in a chair?"

He put a hand over her face and pushed.

"Lie down," he said. "Lie down and go to sleep. Not another peep out of you or I swear I'll ship you back on the first train tomorrow morning."

She seized the pillow and threw it on the floor again. She could sleep now because he had touched her, and sat on her feet, and looked at her as if he wanted to make love to her.

"You can't," she said, lying back at peace, smiling at him contentedly. "You can't ship me away. Tomorrow's only Saturday. You said I had to stay till Monday morning, the eight o'clock train. You said so yourself."

He grunted. There was a little doorstep near the bed, painted iron, shaped like a basket of flowers. He picked it up and hefted it. He set it on the table by Gracia.

"Use that, Gracia," he said. "Heave it at her if she opens her head once more tonight."

He shut the door behind him, and Livy giggled. The light went out.

She put her hand out in the dark and touched the wall. His bed was close to it, on the other side. It wasn't a thick wall. It couldn't be. He had heard her through it when she raised her voice. Only a few inches, perhaps, between their beds. Did he lie with his head toward the hall, as she was lying, and his feet toward the windows? Did he like an enor-

mous pillow under his head, or even two of them, as her father liked, or did he sleep, as she always had, with none?

The wall wasn't thick between them. If she cried out to him, he could hear.

I love him. I love him. I love him.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Had she said it aloud? The silence was oppressive. She held her breath to listen. There was no sound of any other breathing. Surely if Gracia's heart beat, it could be heard in such utter silence.

"Gracia, Gracia."

She whispered it. She had to. The silence was pressing against her, wrapping her round, brushing against her face, filling her mouth, clinging to her as if the room were full of floating cobwebs.

"Yes?"

The dark was thick with sorrow.

"Gracia, Gracia, why haven't you married again?"

"Because no one has asked me."

"It isn't fair. You've gone on living here with his family, everyone thinking of you as his wife still. You've probably met their friends and nobody else. He's remarried. Why shouldn't you? Why shouldn't you have another chance at being happy?"

"But I have been happy. I am happy."

There was a light thump on the wall.

"The heel of Ames' slipper," whispered Gracia. "Good night."

8

THE sun was brilliant. It was going to be hot.

In the other bed Gracia lay motionless, her face to the wall. Livy stepped out onto the rug and crossed to a window. She looked through motionless green leaves to a cloudless sky more bright than blue. By midday the sky would have no color at all, only glare.

Her spirits were high. They nearly always were when she woke in the morning, no matter what alarms had nagged her the night before.

She sniffed the air. A lovely smell, and it wasn't garden, it was kitchen. It was coffee. She jumped into her clothes. It would be wonderful if Ames were downstairs, breakfasting early. It would be a good omen if he proved to be, like herself, the kind of person who waked early, feeling fine, who enjoyed breakfast more than any other meal. It took some people two or three cups of coffee to get their eyes uncrossed. The girls who shared her apartment were like that, and her mother had always waked expecting the worst.

The dining room was empty, the table stripped. She pushed the swing door and went into the kitchen. Mrs. Prout was bending down to light the oven. Livy addressed her rump cheerfully, "Good morning, Mrs. Prout. Am I the first down?"

The cook dropped the lighted match into the oven. She turned off the gas and straightened up, folding her skinny

arms. Her little black eyes went over Livy from hastily applied lipstick to gingham shirt to shorts to long bare legs to socks and shoes.

"I smelled coffee," said Livy, thinking, If I had a cook who gave me dirty looks like that, I'd never have an easy moment. I'd choke on every mouthful, expecting poison. "I thought someone must be having an early breakfast. Does Mr. Ames usually come down early?"

"No," said Mrs. Prout, "he don't."

At one corner of her bitter mouth was a small black mole with two stiff hairs growing out of it. Livy tried not to look at it but it drew her eyes.

"Then somebody's been having coffee in bed."

On the table was a painted tray with a small silver pot and a cup and saucer. The cup held dark brown dregs. Drip coffee nearly always left that slight deposit.

"Mrs. Chelsea always has it first thing," said Mrs. Prout grudgingly.

"Is there any left?" asked Livy. "I'd love a cup."

The cook picked up the small drip pot from the sink and removed the lid.

"There ain't a drop," she sounded triumphant. She reached for the silver pot but Livy's hand was quicker.

"There's some in this. Mrs. Chelsea didn't drink it all. Don't bother with a clean cup. I'll rinse out this one."

She stepped to the sink and rinsed the cup thoroughly. She helped herself to a dish towel on the rack.

"I won't get in your way. I'll sit right here on this stool in the corner," she said, determinedly pleasant.

Instead of going back to light the oven, the cook stood where she was, her arms folded in her apron, her angry eyes fixed on the cup at Livy's mouth, watching every swallow.

I suppose I've cheated her out of it, Livy thought without remorse. But she needn't have been so rude. I suppose she makes two cups every morning and Mrs. Chelsea has one and she has the other, down here, at her ease. Well, she can make some fresh for herself when I've gone.

"I hear that your grandson has joined the army, Mrs. Prout. That's splendid. You must be very proud of him."

The cook exploded.

"I ain't proud! They'll ruin him, that's what they'll do! I brought him up strict, and they'll teach him wickedness!"

"I imagine the army discipline is stricter than yours ever was," said Livy chattily. "I should think you'd be thankful to have him off your hands and off your mind. It must be a great responsibility for a woman alone to bring up a boy. Don't worry about him. The army will make a man of him."

"I don't want him made a man of!" cried Mrs. Prout. "He was trouble enough to me the way he was!"

"Then you must be glad he's gone. It'll be a real vacation for you, a whole year and maybe more."

Mrs. Prout, getting nowhere with temper, tried a new histrionic effect. Her tiny hard face wrinkled up in self-pity.

"They hadn't ought to of taken him. I'm an old woman. It ain't right I should be left alone. I ain't well. I might die in the night any time, with one of my spells, and not a soul to call out to."

Livy said, "Oh, dear, if you're given to spells, that's serious. Of course you shouldn't live alone. Is your heart weak? Have you seen a doctor about it?"

Venom burned away the self-pity.

"There ain't nothing wrong with my heart!" yelled Mrs. Prout as if she had been insulted. "There ain't nothing wrong with me but the government and the way this coun-

try's run! It hadn't ought to of took Benjy when Mr. Ames wasn't took!"

"Oh, if that's all that's bothering you," said Livy, "you wait and see. Mr. Ames will be going to camp one of these days, not right away, but within the year, I expect. Your grandson's got the jump on him, going in now. He'll probably be a corporal or something when Mr. Ames turns up as a plain buck private."

"He'll get out of it, that's what he'll do!" yelled Mrs. Prout. "He'll get married and get out of it!"

Livy was puzzled for a moment as to which she meant, her grandson or Ames.

"Do you mean Mr. Ames? But getting married now wouldn't keep him from being called. Besides, he'd probably be only too glad to get away from responsibility for a year. I should think the Chelsea Press could survive that long without him."

"You talk!" shouted the cook. "You talk, but when you're married to him you'll talk different! You'll hang onto him for dear life, that's what you'll do!"

Livy set her empty cup on the table.

"Thanks for the coffee," she said. "There was no harm in my drinking it, was there? Since Mrs. Chelsea didn't want it, it would only have gone down the drain, wouldn't it?"

Mrs. Prout's face had a purplish tinge, reflected, no doubt, from her remarkable hair.

"I don't waste nothing!" she yelled.

Livy walked around her and out the back door into the blinding sunshine. The key to the garden hung on a nail in the house wall. She unlocked the little gate and went down to the far end of the garden to sit cross-legged on the green turf path. The iris blossoms all about her were cool-looking and pale-colored, the petals almost transparent, intricately

ruffled. Many had withered in the night.

Surely Ames would be down presently. Mrs. Prout's yelling must have roused the house. Imagine all of them in there, sleeping away a morning like this. But perhaps it was very early. Being without a wrist watch was at certain times a handicap. When he's with me, she thought, I want time to stop. I want to hold onto every moment. A week end is very short. But when I'm with the others, or by myself, waiting for him, I wish my watch would run so that I could watch the hands move toward the time of his return.

She walked along the path, snapping off the withered blossoms. It must be a garden entirely for cutting, since there was no open grass plot for chairs, and obviously it wasn't a garden for looking, since it couldn't be seen from the street or from the house, either, without walking around the piano to stand at the window. There were no chairs at that end of the living room. No one, apparently, except Florence the cat ever sat there to look at the garden. Well, perhaps Mrs. Prout enjoyed seeing it when she washed dishes. There was a large window over the sink. What an exceptionally unpleasant old party Mrs. Prout was.

When you're married to him, she had said.

I suppose her point of view is a reflection of the family point of view, Livy thought. Any girl he looks at is looked at by the family in the light of a possible wife for him.

When you're married, Mrs. Prout had shouted. Not if.

That would suggest that his inviting a girl to his home for a week end was a mark of unusual interest and didn't occur frequently. His inviting an out-of-town girl for a dance, when he didn't like dancing, must be regarded by the family as a sign of something or other.

Something or other. Just what, she thought, I'll find out before Monday. If we ever get two minutes alone together.

The family is terribly omnipresent. Darling, darling, please wake up and come down to me.

There was a flicker of white at the living room window and her heart jumped. But it was only Florence, framed by the ruffled white curtains, observing the morning from unwinking golden eyes.

The scratches on Livy's wrist no longer smarted, but they were angry-looking ridges, the color of dried blood.

The white cat arched her back, her plume waving, and beyond her, reaching to stroke her, Ames appeared. Livy waved frantically and he saw her and smiled, calling out something she couldn't hear. She beckoned and he nodded, waiting while Florence walked up him.

When he came around the house, the cat was draped along his shoulder, hanging on with all her claws. Livy was at the gate to meet him. He said, "You're an early one. Out looking for your worm, I suppose."

"I never eat worms," she said. "I'm not a fussy feeder but I do draw the line somewhere."

He shook the gate.

"It's locked. Did you jump over?"

Waiting for him, she had snapped the padlock shut and tossed the key into the grass.

He glanced toward the nail where the key usually hung.

"I lost it," said Livy. "It's somewhere in the grass. I don't know where."

She didn't, either. For all she knew, he might be standing on it. He eyed her across the gate, smiling a little. Florence mewed and began to lap his ear.

"Floosy, stop it. I've already washed."

The cat leaped from his shoulder into the garden and walked away from them, lifting her pink pads delicately as if reluctant to crush the turf by her weight.

"If I could jump like that," said Ames, "I'd join you in the garden, Maud. But I can't be sprightly before breakfast."

"It isn't a very high fence."

"Don't lure me to destruction, woman. We might both regret it. What if I tore my pants on the pickets? I'd never forgive you. I'm very fond of these pants. Besides, Rufus was the family athlete. Not me."

"Oh," she said, "he was one of those, was he? A mantel lined with trophies and a cupboard full of cups?"

"You don't sound impressed."

"I've never cared for muscle men," she said.

"Oh, Rufus had plenty besides muscle."

He laughed.

"Though I admit," he said, "that while I was getting my growth, it was Rufus' brawn that I most admired. I wrecked my digestion stuffing myself one whole winter with twice the food I could take care of, trying to make myself grow taller and broader to catch up with Rufus. I didn't put on an inch or a pound. I merely got myself into such a condition that you could have used my liver for *pâté de fois gras*. It was a terrible blow to me when I finally realized that physically I wasn't a Chelsea and never would be. Celeste and I are runts, like all Mother's people. Dad and Uncle Rufe were big and blond. That's where Serena gets her looks, from the Chelsea line, and Rufus did, too."

He pulled a battered package of cigarettes from his pants pocket.

"Have a squashed one?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know why I talk about Rufus in the past tense," he said, "as if he were dead, just because I haven't seen him for a few years."

She said, "You sound as if you were fond of him."

"Why, I was," he said, looking surprised. "I am. Why not? Oh, you mean because of the way he treated Gracia. But I always blamed the girl for that."

"You blamed Gracia?"

"Of course not! Don't be obtuse, Livy!" he was genuinely exasperated. "I mean the girl who got him away from Gracia. If she had let him alone, he'd probably be married to Gracia now. I think it's downright vicious for a woman to go after a man when she knows that getting him will mean smashing a marriage, unless, of course, the marriage is intolerable."

"I think so, too," said Livy.

I proved that I thought so, didn't I? Four years ago. I left before there could be a smash. But of course I can't pat myself on the back too much because it was easy for me to pick up and leave. Not easy to give him up, but easy to go. The girl who wanted Gracia's husband couldn't leave so easily; she had a home here, and a husband, and children.

"Is Rufus married to that girl now?"

Ames nodded.

"I imagine he's reasonably happy. But he was happy with Gracia, too, till that harpy got hold of him. At least, I never saw any sign that he wasn't."

"Was Gracia very much in love with him?"

"Of course she was. Women always fell for him."

Was there a touch of rancor there, or did she imagine it?

"Were you ever just a little jealous of him?"

"No!" he said flatly.

"He never took a girl away from you?"

"No," he said, but he hesitated before he said it.

"You mean," said Livy, watching his face, "that he didn't have to take her. She went of her own accord. And how old

were you at the time? Twenty or so? And was it the first time you'd been hit? Seriously, I mean?"

"And how do you know so much?" he asked, amused.

"I don't know. How could I? I'm guessing. I was twenty when it hit me hard for the first time."

She liked its having happened to both of them at the same age. It linked them together, somehow.

"I'd never had a girl of my own before," he said. "The girls I went through high school with were all crazy about Rufus, in spite of their being considerably younger than he was. It was made pretty clear to me that my only real attraction for them was my relationship to him. When he was away, I had reflected glory as his kid brother, but as soon as he came home, they just couldn't see me."

"But that can't have been true of all of them!" she exclaimed. "You must have imagined it."

"It was true of the ones I really liked," he said, "and the others I didn't want. I had the bad luck or the bad judgment or something to like the kind of girl that Rufus liked, the kind he singled out for special attention when he came home."

"Oh," she said. Yes, that explained it.

And what kind was that? she wondered. Would Rufus have singled me out?

"And what about this girl you were really in love with? The one you thought was really your own?"

"She was in college with me. She'd never set eyes on Rufus. He was through by that time, back here in the Press with Dad. I brought her home for a week end to meet the family. I wasn't engaged to her, mind you. We were only kids. But I had great expectations. I meant to marry her as soon as we both finished school and I landed a job. The family didn't know I was serious about her."

"You mean Rufus didn't know. You keep defending him. Yet he took your girl away from you."

"He didn't, I tell you. He didn't make a play for her. He didn't have to."

"I suppose the little fool took one look at him and fell into a swoon," said Livy fiercely. "I suppose she fell so hard for him that she couldn't see you afterward for star dust."

It was ridiculous, and she knew it, to be so angry at a girl she had never seen and never would see, simply because a good many years ago the silly little fool had slighted Ames.

She started to laugh, it was so ridiculous, but the laughter dried up in her throat. She was frightened. One of those unseen cobwebs that had troubled her last night in the dark and the silence of Gracia's bedroom was brushing against her face, now, in the morning, in the broad sunlight, touching and clinging.

She stared at Ames across the gate.

"It was Gracia," she said. "It was Gracia, wasn't it?"

Gracia and Ames. They were the same age. Younger than Rufus. In college together. Gracia and Ames.

"Of course it wasn't," he said, and laughed.

"It was Gracia," she said. "You brought her home from college to meet the family. And she's still here. She fell in love with Rufus and married him."

But she isn't married to him now. He's gone and by now the star dust must be gone from her eyes.

Gracia and Ames. Why didn't I think of it before? Because there hasn't been time to think of it. He said she was his sister and I believed it until just before I went to sleep last night. But the room was full of cobwebs. The air was thick with something I felt but couldn't see.

"You dodo," said Ames, laughing. "Gracia wasn't in school with me and I never met her till after I finished and

was here at home in the Press with Dad and Rufus. I never met her till after she was engaged to Rufus."

He dropped the butt of his cigarette and trod on it, looking down to make sure that it was out.

"Here's the lost key," he said.

A flock of sparrows rose from the far end of the garden with a terrified outcry.

"Damn that cat," said Ames. "Floosy, where are you? Come away from there!"

She came, not because he called her, naturally, but in evil pride to show him the bird she was carrying in her jaws.

"Oh, you beast!" said Livy.

"Let her alone!" he said. "She'll mangle you!"

But before he had the key in the padlock Livy had Florence by the ruff and the bird was free.

"It isn't hurt," she said. "It can still fly. Of course it may collapse later of post-traumatic shock."

"You don't know the meaning of caution, do you?" he said.

He locked the gate behind them and hung up the key.

"It seems dreadful," she said, "to have to lock up a garden and hunt around for a key before you can pick a few flowers."

"It isn't a cutting garden. She never picks them."

"Then what is it for? It isn't a sitting garden."

"Oh, she enjoys it. She works in it."

He drew her hand through his arm.

"Come in the back way and I'll introduce you to Mrs. Prout."

She hung back.

"I've already met her. I had coffee in the kitchen while you were still snoring."

"I don't snore. Well, you must have made a hit. Mother

is usually the only one who gets early coffee."

"I'm afraid I made several hits," said Livy. "Not the kind you mean. Let's go in the front way."

They met Gracia in the front hall. She looked worried.

"Breakfast will be late," she said. "Mrs. Prout hasn't even started it. I don't know what's the matter with her. She's just sitting there, crying."

"Crying!" said Ames. "Do you mean it? I didn't suppose she could. I thought her tear ducts were vestigial. I'll bet her tears are acetic acid, not salt water."

"Ames, would you talk to her? She won't answer me."

He went out to the kitchen with Gracia at his heels. The cook was sitting at the kitchen table, her elbow braced on the table edge, her forehead resting against her hand.

"What's wrong, Mrs. Prout?"

She did not lift her head.

"I ain't well," she moaned.

"That's too bad," said Ames briskly. "What seems to be the trouble?"

"My side hurts. I got such a pain in my side I can't breathe good."

"Your left side? That must be heart."

Her head snapped up. She glared.

"It ain't heart! It's lower down. I've knowed for weeks I wasn't well. I expect I've got a growth. You'd best send for Benjy."

"We'll send for the doctor," said Ames.

"I don't want no doctor!" she shouted. "If I've got a growth I'll die but I'll die peaceable. I won't have no doctor pawing over me."

"And if you haven't got a growth," said Ames, "think how relieved you'll be to know you haven't. You may have nothing worse than indigestion."

"There ain't nothing wrong with my stomach!" flared Mrs. Prout.

"We'll soon find out what's wrong," he said. "You go out and lie on the sun porch couch till we've finished breakfast and then I'll take you in the car to Dr. Cheney's office and he'll give you the works, x-rays and everything."

"Breakfast ain't ready," she said. "It ain't even begun."

"We'll get it ourselves. Don't you fret. I'll make the coffee myself. I make superb coffee."

The reference to coffee had a disastrous effect.

"That girl!" Mrs. Prout yelled. "She come into my kitchen and she accused me right to my face!"

He didn't have to ask what girl.

"You misunderstood her."

"She as good as told me right to my face I was wasteful! After all the years I've cooked for your mother! You ask your mother if ever I throwed away a pinch of anything! There ain't enough goes into the garbage tin to feed a kitten! You look in the tin yourself and see! There ain't nothing in it but coffee grounds and orange skins and eggshells and there can't nobody eat them! You just look and see for yourself!"

"I wouldn't for anything," said Ames. "Go and lie down."

She threw her apron over her head and rushed out of the kitchen.

"For God's sake," he said, "what can Livy have done to her?"

And why couldn't Livy have kept away from the kitchen? They had all made it perfectly clear the night before, what a state Mrs. Prout was in. There had been that unfortunate episode with Florence walking in the pies. But Livy should have more sense than a cat.

He was angry with her and angry with Mrs. Prout, con-

vinced that her pain was phony, trumped up to make trouble, and he wanted his breakfast badly.

"We can scratch together a breakfast, can't we, Gracia? What do we do first?"

She said soberly, "It won't be just breakfast, you know. It'll be meals for the whole week end. You won't get a report on x-rays till Monday, and until we know there's nothing wrong we can't expect Mrs. Prout to do any work."

He was aghast. He had thought his handling of Mrs. Prout a masterly job. Now, looking at Gracia's anxious face, he wasn't so sure. Perhaps he had been hasty.

"But what else could I say to her, Gracia? I had to call her bluff."

"It may not be a bluff, you know. At her age anything could be wrong. And lately her disposition has been terrible."

"Her disposition has been terrible, in spells, ever since I've known her," he said, "and that's going on thirty years. Whenever she's frustrated or wants attention, she blows up. Ever since she heard about the draft and realized that Benjy might slip through her fingers, she's been simmering, and now that he's actually enlisted, before being called, she's boiled over."

"Yes," said Gracia, measuring coffee into the large drip pot, "and we're the ones to be scalded. Bring out the eggs, will you, Ames, and the milk and cream?"

"You mean you're the one," he said ruefully. "The dirty work will fall on you."

"And get the oranges, too, will you? Oh, we'll manage. The house is full of food and full of women. We oughtn't to go hungry."

He thumped the bag of oranges down on the table.

"Yes, but Serena's no good in a kitchen and I doubt very

much if Livy is, and it's so many years since Mother did any cooking that it sends her into a dither. You'll do all the work yourself. You'll spend the entire week end in the kitchen, and I won't have it."

He dropped an egg and it squashed on the green linoleum.

"Hell and damnation! Where's a cloth? I'm not going to have you working your head off for guests you didn't invite. Mother invited the Howes here and I asked Livy. They're our responsibility, not yours."

"Look," she said pleasantly, her eyes bright and her thin cheeks flushed a little so that she looked quite pretty, "why don't you set the table and let me manage here? I knew my way around a kitchen before I was ten. My aunts were the best housekeepers in the county, nasty neat, but competent. I have a lot to thank them for even if I couldn't love them."

She was going about the business of breakfast with no fuss and no waste motions. He stepped back out of her way, impressed by her superior deftness and knowledge. He knew how to cook out of doors but in a kitchen he was helpless.

"You're wonderful, Gracia. What would I do without you?"

She faltered for only a moment, her rhythm broken. Then she said lightly, "Oh, I expect you'd get yourself a wife," and went on squeezing oranges.

9

THERE was nothing wrong with the breakfast. There couldn't be. Look at the way Rich was shoveling it in. But Livy had lost her sense of taste.

The fright she had had in the garden was still a coldness down her spine and a chill in the marrow of her bones.

Ames and Gracia. Gracia and Ames.

He sat at one end of the table, serving, and she at the other end, pouring the coffee, in Mrs. Chelsea's place. And she was Mrs. Chelsea, too. A house with two Mrs. Chelseas in it. If Ames married, there would be three. How appalling.

Ames was grouchy because of the lateness of breakfast and because of the trouble with Mrs. Prout. He said little. What little he said was addressed to Gracia. Well, of course there was a special bond between them, responsibility for the household and for his mother's peace of mind, an intimacy unshared by Rich and Livy; and why shouldn't he turn to her in any domestic crisis, exactly the same as if she were his sister? They had lived in the same family under the same roof for a number of years; they had lived through major crises, emotional experiences that must have struck deep.

Experiences, Livy reminded herself, that I never even heard of before this week end. Why shouldn't there be an intimacy and a bond that shuts me out inevitably? Rich is

shut out, too.

But it was Rich's private preoccupation that was shutting him out. He wasn't listening to what was said. He didn't care whether school kept for the Chelseas or not. He had his own trouble.

And I have a minor problem of my own, thought Livy. I have Carl Brittain to deal with. That's enough, surely, without my imagining further complications. My hunch in the garden was wrong, that's all. I guessed wrong. She isn't the girl he wanted at twenty. She isn't the girl his brother took from him. I wonder whatever became of that girl, anyhow? Pete's sake, why wonder? I needn't consider her. She isn't here to be considered. But Gracia is.

He isn't in love with her. That's flat. If he were, he'd have married her long before now. She hasn't been Rufus' wife for five years. Ames isn't in love with her. He's giving her all his attention now because he's upset about the cook. Yes, and maybe he's giving Gracia all his attention in order to punish me a little, because I did my noble bit to upset Mrs. Prout. He's purposely ignoring me, that's perfectly clear. He's deliberately snubbing me. But he's partially justified. And after he's fed, he'll forget his bad temper.

He isn't in love with her.

But what about her?

So that's it, thought Livy, and the chill was in her blood stream. Her hunch in the garden had been partly right. Gracia's face was disciplined to concealment, but her eyes betrayed her.

It's true, thought Livy. I'm not imagining it. I'm not seeing it simply because I'm looking for it. It's the last thing I want to see. But it's there in her eyes, the way they keep going back to him, the way they warm to him in spite of their cold gray color, the way they shine, the way they try

to keep away from him and go back to his face in spite of her.

It's true. She's in love with him. How could she help it, living so close to him for so long? He's very lovable. Lovable, and not conceited; and singularly obtuse. He doesn't know she's in love with him. If he knew it, he wouldn't have laughed as he did in the garden and called me a dodo for suggesting that once he had been in love with her. To laugh like that, if he knew how she felt, would be abominably cruel. He would never be cruel to her. He might be cruel to me. But not to her.

"Coffee, Rich?" asked Gracia.

He held out his cup for the last of the potful. He had finished the eggs, polished off the heaping stack of buttered toast, and scraped the last sticky spoonful of marmalade from the crystal leaf. Trouble hadn't affected his appetite, but food hadn't stiffened his resistance to trouble, either. His big head sagged on his neck as if weighted down by his thick bright spectacles, and his full cheeks seemed to sag a little, the ruddy color in them unpleasantly mottled. At fifty he would have turkey-red jowls and probably a tremendous paunch.

"We haven't left a bite of breakfast for your wife," Livy said to him.

"She doesn't want any."

He pushed his plate and cup back and rested his thick arms on the table.

"Oh," said Livy sympathetically, "morning sickness?"

"She never eats breakfast!"

Ames said, "I suppose this business about Serena puts a crimp in your expedition plans. Your uncle will be disappointed, won't he?"

"He won't have any difficulty finding someone to take

my place. I know half a dozen fellows my age, with the same training I've had, who would jump at the chance to go."

Livy said, "Why can't you go without your wife and fly back in time to be with her when the baby arrives?"

He stared at her stupidly.

"You said the actual research work would last only six months, while the dry season lasted. Well, the baby isn't due till January. You could get back in plenty of time."

He moved his head impatiently as if a fly were buzzing about his ears.

"The expedition is very important to you, professionally, isn't it?" she persisted. "You weren't going just for the ride, were you?"

He struck the table with his open palms and the crockery shuddered.

"I can't go off and leave Serena now! You know I can't!"

"I don't see why you can't," said Livy. "She's perfectly healthy, isn't she? You don't have to sit around and hold her hand for the next seven months. It would be rotten selfish of you to leave her now if you were going just for the fun of the trip, but Ames gave me to understand the expedition was important to your future; and it's Serena's future, too, isn't it? And the baby's? I should think you owed it to your wife to go, much as you may hate leaving her."

"But we've always planned to go together," he said desperately, his high voice cracking in the middle as if it were changing and might at any moment come out a rich bass. "You don't understand, because you're not married. We've always shared and shared alike. Giving up this trip is as bitter a disappointment to her as it is to me. I'd feel like a swine to go off and enjoy myself and leave her to carry the whole brunt of the disappointment."

"It isn't a brunt she'll be carrying. It's a baby," said Livy, "and that's something you can't share and share alike with her, no matter how much you love her or how happy your marriage is. It would be nice, of course, if you and she could carry it turn about, for alternate months, but you aren't equipped for it. It's a job she has to do by herself, a specialized job; and you've specialized in something else, so why don't you go and attend to your job while she stays here and attends to hers?"

"I couldn't," he said drearily. "I wouldn't feel right about it."

She said in disgust, "You're bound to be a martyr, aren't you? If that's how you feel, nothing can prevent you. But I think you're being very pig-headed and selfish about it, and I'll wager if you put it up to her you'd find out that your wife thinks so, too."

Ames said, "Livy, for pity's sake, lay off the poor guy."

"I haven't any pity for self-appointed martyrs," said Livy, throwing down her napkin.

And I, thought Gracia, watching Ames' face, would be a fool to pity Livy.

But she did, a little. Argument at breakfast was something Ames abhorred. But how could Livy be aware of that? She didn't know his likes and dislikes. Perhaps this week end visit would prove to be the quickest way of ending any interest he felt in her. So I ought to be thankful he invited her here, thought Gracia.

But she couldn't help feeling a certain pity for the girl, compunction, almost. Easy, she thought, to be generous toward her when things are going the way I want them to, when he's being so pointedly frosty to her and so sweet to me.

Serena's call, "Rich, darling, where are you?" drew them

all away from the table to the front hall.

Serena, in printed green, with a cartwheel of burnt straw on the back of her head, stood on tiptoe to kiss her husband.

"I'm going down to the sale. I won't be long. Isn't it lovely and warm this morning? The first day I've been able to go out without a coat."

She looked as if nothing weightier than shopping rested upon her mind. Her forehead was serene and smooth under the big hat.

"Lunch at one, Gracia? I'll be back long before that, of course, but trying on always takes more time than you expect."

"Lunch will be whenever people want to make their own sandwiches on the pantry shelf," said Gracia. "Mrs. Prout isn't well, and Ames is taking her to the doctor, and I shall have Daphne and Phyllis on my hands until noon."

Ames said angrily, "Those kids! I'd forgotten about them. You shan't be bothered with them, Gracia. You'll have enough to do, getting Mother dressed and her hair done and the meals planned. Take off that hat, Serena, and make yourself useful."

"But the sale ends today," she protested.

"You stay and mind the kids," he said grimly. "Be good practice for you."

Her carefully tinted lower lip thrust out. Gracia said, "Oh, run along to your sale. I can manage."

I'd rather manage alone, she thought, than to have her around all morning sulking.

Serena beamed.

"You're a pet, Gracia. I'll come back early, I promise."

She lifted her pouting lips to Rich once more and fled. Ames glared after her disgustedly. Then he brightened.

"Gracia, look here, why don't we take a picnic out to

the lake? Cook chops on the charcoal grill? I can do that. Then you won't have to plan any meals for today, because we can go to the hotel for dinner. How about it?"

"The hotel food is dreadful," she said, "but a picnic would be fun. Your mother would love it. It would do her good to sit in the sun a while."

"Then I'll get the chops on my way back from the doctor's. I have to stop in at the Press, too. I'll try to get back around eleven or so. You can take care of yourself till then, can't you, Livy?"

She nodded, but disappointment was plain in her face.

"Rich," said Gracia, "why don't you take Livy out to the lake now? It will be stupid for both of you around the house with nothing to do and the children all over you. It's too nice a day to stay indoors unless you have to. We'll come out later and bring Aunt Bethy and Serena and the luncheon."

"We can take the children with us," offered Livy. "Get them out of your way."

That was thoughtful of her. Gracia felt a moment's real gratitude. But she wasn't certain that either Livy or Rich would make a reliable nursemaid. And Daphne had taken a dislike to Livy. She could be a thoroughly hateful child when she chose.

"I wouldn't dream of abusing a guest to that extent, Livy. I'm used to Daffy's deviltries. You aren't."

"All right," said Livy. "Come on, Rich. Let's make tracks."

The screen door banged behind them as they went off.

"What else shall I get downtown besides the chops?" asked Ames.

"I'll give you a list," she said.

In the kitchen she sat at the table to jot down her list, and

Ames pulled the stool out and perched on it, just across from her, watching her while she wrote and thought and wrote and figured quantities. He said, "We take advantage of you. We let you do too much for all of us, Mother and Celeste and I. I'll bet sometimes you wish you'd never seen any of us."

She didn't look up from her pad.

"I'd be a lunatic to wish that. You're the only family I have that I care about."

"But a family can be a terrible burden at times."

The quick alarm that had plucked at her mind last night took icy hold. He did feel trapped by family responsibilities that weren't of his choosing.

"You're speaking for yourself, not for me, aren't you, Ames?" she could control her voice; it was quiet and conversational, nothing more. Her face she could control. But not her eyes. She kept her eyes on the narrow pad and made a row of slanting lines across it with the pencil. "I've often thought how unfair it is, your having to be the head of a family, two families, in fact, while you're still unmarried and not yet thirty. A wife and children of your own would be a responsibility of your own choosing. But a mother and a sister's family," she hesitated only a second before she could go on, "and a sister-in-law are something else again."

"I don't know what you mean!"

Was there just a touch of bluster in that?

"You know perfectly well what I mean. We all depend upon you now as we did on your father while he was alive. We live by your wits. You're the Chelsea Press."

The money that came to her from Rufus was put into the business and paid back to her, transformed into a kind of income she could accept without revulsion. Elspeth's income came from her share of the business. Charles' salary

came from the business.

"If the Press failed, where would we be? And where would the Press be if it weren't for you?"

"Charles could manage it."

"Oh, be honest. You know it would slide into bankruptcy under Charles' management. He hasn't any initiative. He hasn't any drive. He doesn't get on with people. That haughty aloofness of his puts them off. It puts me off, I felt quite friendly toward him when Celeste first married him, I was sympathetic because of his growing up without any close family, the same sort of lonely growing up that I had; I thought it had made him turn in on himself; that when we broke through that wall of reserve and knew him better, we'd like him better. But it isn't possible to know him any better, and sometimes I wonder if there's anything to know."

"He suits Celeste. You know," said Ames, "I didn't care for that crack she made last night about the business doing so much better in Dad's time. If she isn't satisfied with my management, why doesn't she give me a hand and contribute some of her excess energy to the Press instead of trying to boss the whole town? I'm willing to admit she has a good business head. Little as I like her, I'd rather have her in the Press with me than Charles any day. Then she couldn't complain about the size of her income."

Gracia laughed.

"She wouldn't take up a business career for anything, unless the wolf was actually at her door. She isn't interested in making money; only in having more, to justify her in enlarging her nursery, increasing donations to her pet charities, mending the roof of the Women's Club, and building a new wing on the public library."

"Very sensible of her," said Ames. "Making money

simply to make money is no fun. Not for me, at least. But spending it is fun. I could use a little extra cash if I had it."

"What would you do with it?"

"Finish paying for this house."

"And then what? Build another?" she asked it lightly, but her finger tips, pressing hard on the pencil, were numb. He wanted to marry and live alone with his wife and his children, as a young man should, apart from his mother and sister-in-law. This house had two Mrs. Chelseas in it already. He would feel some hesitation about bringing a third to live in it. The wife might feel some natural hesitation, too.

"Oh God, no," said Ames flatly. "I'll never build another house. I had enough headaches with this one."

She felt a quick relief, but almost at once the relief was laced with fear.

Then he doesn't intend to leave us, she thought. But that means, if he marries, that he will bring his wife to this house. It will be his house and hers, then, not mine. His mother will naturally have a place in it. But what about me? I'm a Chelsea only by marriage, and the marriage was dissolved by law.

"We had fun building this house, though, didn't we, Gracia, along with all the headaches?"

We, he said. We.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Wonderful fun. I love this house. I've been wonderfully happy in it."

The happiest three years of my life. But if I said so, you wouldn't believe me.

She couldn't say, It isn't the house that I love. It's living in it with you that I love. It's being free from Rufus that I love. The divorce was a blessed relief to me, not a disaster.

She could never say that.

"Tell me," said Ames abruptly, a little stiffly, as if the asking were repugnant to him, "do you like her, Gracia?"

His attention had left the house and her. It had gone out into the sunshine, following Livy.

The pencil pressed so hard against the pad that the lead snapped off.

"Why, she takes my breath away, rather."

He laughed. He was obviously embarrassed.

"Mine, too."

He had never been in the least self-conscious, discussing the others. But his interest in the others had been fleeting.

"Her directness is very disarming," said Gracia slowly, picking the words with infinite care. "I find myself telling her things I hadn't intended to. But her downrightness isn't a bit like Celeste's. It startles without hurting. I suppose that's because she's so warm and authentically interested in other people. I'm sure I shall like her when I get used to her, Ames."

She tore the list off the pad and handed it to him.

"I hope Mrs. Prout hasn't expired in the sun porch of spontaneous combustion, while we've sat here talking," she said, "and I hope your mother doesn't think I've forgotten all about her. I must hurry and get her ready for the picnic before the children come over."

He said, "Find out if Mother likes Livy, will you? I don't mean ask her outright, but sort of feel out the ground. Mother will confide things to you that she'd sooner cut her tongue out than mention to me."

Gracia grasped the table edge to steady herself. She had a moment of deathly sickness.

He loves her, she thought. He loves her. He may not have asked her to marry him, but he loves her. If he didn't, what his mother and I think of her wouldn't matter.

"Gracia, do you feel all right? Your eyes look like burnt holes in a blanket. Did you have another sleepless night?"

The room stopped lurching. The vertigo left her. She saw his eyes fixed upon her, anxious and kind. He was frowning a little, with anxiety for her. He had forgotten Livy. But in a moment he would remember.

"I slept like a log."

From daylight on. I might have gone to sleep at midnight if you hadn't come in and sat on the foot of her bed and looked at her in her yellow pajamas, with her black curls a frowsy mop. You looked at her as if you wanted to go to bed with her. You forgot I was in the room at all. How could I sleep after that?

He folded the list and pocketed it.

"Well, now for the Prout," he said.

She stayed in the kitchen until she heard the car leave. She sat at the table, pressing her hands against her eyelids. Her hands were cold but they always were, even in mid-summer. Poor circulation. When he had a headache, he wanted her hands on his forehead. "No, I don't want an ice bag. I want your little paws. Yes, like that. Keep them there. They stop the aching." Sometimes he teased her about them. "I'm going to have summer mittens knitted for you with miniature hot water bottles to fit inside. They'll look like refined boxing gloves sprouting from your lady-like wrists."

She went up to Elspeth. The bedroom door was shut and she tapped.

"Is that you, Gracia?"

She opened the door and went in.

"I thought it was your step, dearest," Elspeth reached out her arms in eager welcome, her eyes stretched to their widest, her whisper conspiratorial. "Shut the door so that

nobody can hear us."

She was propped up against two enormous pillows, a pink knitted bed jacket over her nightgown, a pink mesh cap on her head to keep the waves in place. The carved posts of the huge bed were almost as thick through as she was. She was so tiny. But her husband had been a big man who had liked a big bed.

"Nobody can hear us, Aunt Bethy. We're alone in the house. We can say anything we like. We can shout if we choose."

Elspeth sank back, beaming.

"Oh, how lovely! Where is everyone?"

"Ames has gone down to the market to buy chops. We're going to have a picnic at the lake and cook on the grill. Rich and Livy have gone out there already, and Serena is shopping."

"A picnic! Oh, how lovely!" Elspeth beat her withered hands together gently. "We can take the little girls with us, can't we? And perhaps Charles and Celeste will drive out in the afternoon. I do love a family picnic, all of us together."

Her hands dropped to the sheet and lay still. Her face stopped working. It was tense and still.

"Gracia. Is Ames seriously interested in this girl? It seems as if he must be or he wouldn't have asked her to stay in the house and share in the things we do together as a family. A week end like this is so very intimate."

"I'm sure he's interested," said Gracia with great calmness. "How serious his interest is, I have no idea. I doubt if he knows himself."

Elspeth drew a long difficult breath.

"I want him to marry. You know that, Gracia. I want him to feel settled and contented and not restless. I want

him to be happy and to have children of his own."

She wanted grandchildren whose name was Chelsea. Gracia knew that. Elspeth doted on Celeste's little girls, but they were Brittain's. Rufus had two sons by his second wife, the elder born a month after the marriage. But Elspeth never referred to them. They were Chelseas but their grandmother Chelsea would never see them. Rufus had sent snapshots of them. Gracia had found the snapshots under the pillow when she made up Elspeth's bed. More than once she had found a picture of Rufus under the pillow along with a tight damp ball of a handkerchief. Elspeth did her crying in the dark, in secret.

"I was terribly happy and excited when he said he'd invited a girl here for the week end, Gracia. I could hardly wait to see her. I was sure it must mean something because it's years since he's asked a girl right into the family. I wanted to like her. I expected to. I usually do like the people my children like."

So she didn't like her.

Gracia said nothing. She wasn't going to discuss the girl with Elspeth and be obliged to wonder afterward, with guilt, whether her own feeling of hostility had communicated itself to Elspeth and helped to establish a prejudice.

I have enough to feel guilty about without that, thought Gracia.

"She makes me feel so old," murmured Elspeth sadly. "I know I'm old but I hate to be reminded of it. I hate to be made to feel like Mrs. Methuselah, ashamed of myself for not having died years ago. It isn't anything she says or does, exactly. It's the way she is. So bursting with vitality. So terribly, well, strenuous."

"She does have considerable bounce," said Gracia, smiling. "At midnight last night she was still wide awake and

bright-eyed, and this morning she was dressed and down before any of us."

"I don't think she likes me, Gracia. I was ready to accept her with open arms, and she snubbed me. I don't suppose she meant to, but if it was unconscious, so much the worse. It means she doesn't care enough about any of us to bother. Except about Ames, of course. She's in love with him."

Gracia held out her hands.

"Come," she said. "Let's get ready for the picnic."

10

THE woods road was bumpy and Rich drove carelessly and fast, hitting every bump.

"This will certainly shake down our breakfast," said Livy and hoped she wouldn't get canker where her teeth had met on her tongue.

He didn't slow down and he didn't bother to reply. He hadn't spoken since they had left the house. She didn't mind. She was perfectly willing to ride in silence. She guessed his thoughts were unpleasant. Hers were, too. A morning apart from Ames was a morning gone to limbo. A whole morning out of her week end with him. Yesterday the week end had stretched before her as long as if it were a whole happy lifetime to be spent in Ames' company, if not in his arms. But here it was Saturday. It would be noon before she saw him. And Monday morning was day after tomorrow. The hours were slipping between her fingers, and what had she to show for them? Practically nothing. He had kissed her once. Exactly once. She had had a split second alone with him yesterday in Celeste's horrid living room, and he had taken her in his arms and he might have kissed her but the shock of having seen Carl the moment before had kept her rigid and unresponsive with Ames in spite of herself. No wonder he hadn't kissed her then. A man wasn't going to make love to a pillar of salt.

She had had a handful of minutes alone with him in the garden before breakfast. Well, perhaps it was too much to expect a man to make love before breakfast. He had been in no mood for playfulness, that clownish impulse that had made her lock the gate and toss the key into the grass on the other side for him to find. She had lost her playfulness quickly enough when he spoke about the girl he had lost to Rufus, the girl she had thought must be Gracia.

He isn't in love with Gracia, she thought with conviction. But why isn't he? Pete's sake, he seems to think she's perfect. He acts as if his world revolved around her. And his mother dotes on her. Men have married for less. Why hasn't he?

"Rich, why hasn't Ames married? He's nearly thirty and must have felt the urge, and there must have been any number of girls in Hotchkiss and elsewhere, eager and willing to oblige."

In the last five years, that is, she amended, since Rufus cleared out and left a free field.

The car hit a rut and she bit her tongue again.

"How would I know?" Rich sounded surly. "He's got a couple of women on his hands already. Maybe he thought Aunt Bethy and Gracia were plenty without his bringing a wife to live with them."

"With them? You mean his mother and Gracia would expect to go on living with him after he married?"

"Where else would they live? He built that house especially for them. He wouldn't throw them out. Each of them has a small income, enough for clothes, that's about all. The old man left the business to Ames and Celeste and what money he had, which wasn't much, to Aunt Bethy, and she popped it right into the business. She expects to live with one child or the other, but she isn't happy if she has to see too much of her daughter. So Ames put up the little house

on purpose to please her. It isn't paid for yet and he couldn't afford to pull out and run two places if he married."

She had a taste of blood in her mouth and she touched the tip of a finger to her bitten tongue. It hurt like blazes, but her exhilaration was such that no doubt a little blood-letting was a good thing. She was almost as happy as she had been on the train coming to Hotchkiss.

Now it's all clear, she thought joyfully. Now I know where I stand and why he invited me here so soon and why he warned me to be especially careful to please his mother and why he was anxious for Gracia and me to be friends and why he's holding off instead of making love to me. He's giving me time to look the situation over and see exactly what marrying him would let me in for. The way things were going between us, if he had come to see me once more, instead of asking me here, we'd be married by now, or anyhow, things would have been settled between us; and it wouldn't have been so good if he'd brought me here after that and I'd unsettled everything by loathing his mother and Gracia. Because I might have. And he has this idea that I don't stick to anything. But that's because he doesn't really know me. All he knows is how many different addresses I've had in the last ten years.

Oh, darling, darling, she thought, if getting on with your mother and Gracia is all I have to worry about, I can put that worry off until after we're married and deal with it then. I'll be as good as gold for the rest of the week end. You'll see. I can be wonderfully good when I try and when I know what I'm up against, and now I know.

Rich said, "There's the lake."

The road was a leafy tunnel. At the far end of it she saw a sparkle of blue. Presently the road widened out into a clearing and there was the lake spread out, a glittering oval,

with woods coming thickly down all round to the shores. Before the car had quite stopped she was out of it and running down to the water's edge to crouch on the stones and plunge her hands into the water. It was cold and clear. She saw minnows darting.

Behind her Rich said, "All that talk of yours at breakfast about my wanting to make a martyr of myself and my owing it to Serena to go and leave her, you were just talking, weren't you? You didn't mean it, did you?"

I must be good, she reminded herself. I must keep my nose out of what doesn't concern me. Ames invited me here this week end to be an onlooker, not a participant in family tangles.

"I certainly did mean it, but I should have kept my trap shut. Whether you go or stay, and why, is none of my business."

He sat down on a smooth flat stone so low that his knees came nearly up to his large red ears.

"It isn't your business but I'd like your opinion all the same."

"My opinion has no value, Rich. I don't know you and Serena well enough."

"That's why I want to hear what you think. You're outside the family. You're unbiased. And you're a woman. That's why I was so much surprised by what you said at breakfast. I wouldn't have been surprised if Ames had said it, or any man; but I thought women would feel the way Aunt Bethy does. You heard what Aunt Bethy said last night; that a baby is the most important thing in life, worth any sacrifice."

"But she was talking to Serena, trying to console her. It's obvious that Serena can't go on the trip."

"She was talking to both of us," he answered simply.

"She never dreamed I'd go off and leave Serena at such a time. I didn't dream of it myself till you said what you did. And of course I'm not going. But I'm interested in knowing how you feel about it. Aunt Bethy would think me a heel if I went. You seem to think I'm pig-headed and selfish not to go."

"Do you care so much about what people think?"

"I don't give a damn for what anyone thinks," he said, "except Serena."

"And what does she say?"

"She hasn't said anything about it. We haven't discussed it. She was asleep when I got in last night. I hadn't intended to stay out so long, but I kept walking and pretty soon I found I was halfway out here to the lake. It's funny," he said, "how bad I felt when I got back and found she'd gone to sleep without me. I never felt so lonely. Usually neither of us can go to sleep till the other one comes to bed. We haven't been separated for a single night in the whole three years we've been married."

"She had a bad headache," said Livy, "and I don't wonder she did after the way Celeste had been talking to her. I expect she took something to stop the pain and it doped her."

He brightened.

"I expect that was it. She can't stand the least twinge of pain. I suppose it's because she's never had to. She's a perfect physical specimen. She's never sick, even for a day. She's never even had a toothache."

"If she's as healthy as all that," said Livy, "there isn't much doubt she'll have an easy time of it from now till the baby comes. All the more reason why you could leave her with a clear conscience. A lot of women feel better while they're pregnant than at any other time. They simply bloom."

He was scooping up pebbles in his big paws, rubbing the

small smooth gray and white stones together, letting them fall. His fingers were thick and big-knuckled, the nails square and moonless. The springy blond hair on the backs of his hands was bright gold in the sun, although the hair on his head had no color to speak of, bleached almost to white.

"If she thought there was a chance of my going without her," he said, "I know perfectly well what she'd say."

"She'd tell you to go?"

"She wouldn't hesitate a moment. I know that. But God, how I hate to put it up to her."

"Why, if you know what she'll say?"

"Because she'll want me to do what I want to do, do you see? And I've got to be sure I'm doing it, not because I want to, but because it's the wise thing to do, the best thing for both of us in the long run. How do I know I'm not kidding myself that it's the wise thing to do, simply because I want so terribly to do it? That's where you can help me. You're a woman. You aren't married, but suppose you were. Suppose you'd been happily married for three years and you were going to have a baby, and there was a choice of jobs for your husband, one that would keep him with you but might also keep him in a dead end all his life, and one that would take him away from you for seven months but might give him a boost professionally. What would you advise him to do?"

"I'd tell him to get the hell out and do his job and hurry back. I'd want him with me when the baby arrived. I'd want that terribly. Is there anything short of sickness or death that could prevent your getting back in time for that?"

His insignificant voice was suddenly impressive, matched to his bulk, "I'd get back if I had to crawl on my hands and knees."

He stood up, impressively tall and broad.

"I'm going for a walk around the lake. Want to come?"

"No," she said. "I want a sun bath. I want it with my shirt off, so don't come back too soon."

There was a narrow flimsy pier jutting out into the lake. She could lie flat on that. The shore was too rocky to lie on, and farther up the bank, in the grass, there would be too much insect life.

The clearing and the pier suggested that once there had been a cottage on the lake shore. Surprising that a lake so near the town wasn't hemmed in by cottages.

I wish we could build a house right here, she thought, with windows looking out across the water. It isn't too far to drive back and forth every day. Lots of men commute farther. But I suppose the road isn't open in winter.

She spread her shirt out on the rough boards of the pier. She didn't want to get splinters in her front. She lay down on her stomach with her face on her folded arms. The sun was just right, not too hot. The gentle slap of the water against the pier and the gentle swish of it along the shore would put her to sleep if she wasn't careful. There was a tiny breeze, just enough to keep the trees and the water talking in undertones.

We could build a house right here and go to sleep at night with the sound of the lake in our ears. But he already has a house and it isn't paid for. Well, maybe we could pitch a tent and spend the whole summer here, away from the family. After we'd lived together a whole summer, even if it was only nights and week ends, because of course he'd have to be at the Press five days a week, it wouldn't be so dangerous for us to live in the same house with his mother and Gracia, with Carl at the other end of the lot.

After two people had been happily married a while and were used to each other and sure of each other, it wasn't so

dangerous having other people around all the time. Now was the dangerous period, before things were settled, and the period right after marriage.

We ought to have some time to ourselves, she thought. I wish, I wish, I wish we were as sure of each other as Rich and Serena. I wish we'd been married for at least a year and that I was expecting a baby, even with Ames going off for a year in the army, even if he were going away for longer, as he may well have to if we're in the war by then.

Serena is a very lucky girl. I'd give a lot to be in her shoes if Ames were wearing Rich's. But Rich's shoes would be too big for Ames and Serena's would pinch my big feet.

The sound of a car made her sit up in a hurry and pull on her shirt. She blinked. Her head felt heavy and hot.

The Chelsea car came jouncing into the clearing and she scrambled up, shouting and waving. How wonderful. The morning wasn't wasted after all. Ames must have hurried through his various jobs, as anxious to be with her as she was anxious to have him. She started up the slope, half running, then slowed abruptly. He wasn't even looking toward her. He was lifting his mother out of the car. Gracia was helping the children down on the other side. Serena, who had jumped down ahead of the children, had turned her back on them. She came toward Livy, picking her way over the slippery pine needles. Her high-heeled slippers were all wrong for such uncertain walking. Her pretty ankles wobbled a little and she was frowning. The burnt straw cart-wheel was still on the back of her head, held on by narrow black ribbons that tied in a bow under her chin.

"Where's Rich?" she called. She sounded fretful.

"He went for a walk around the lake," said Livy. "We didn't think you'd be getting here before noon."

Serena looked at her sharply.

"But it is noon. We took awfully long getting started. It took Gracia forever to pack the lunch because the children were out in the kitchen under her feet all the time. I do think Celeste might stay at home and mind her own children if she's too stingy to hire a nursemaid. Roselle can't be expected to mind them and do all the housework, too. I'd be ashamed to pay a maid so little and expect her to do all the cooking and cleaning and washing and ironing in a house that size. Heavens, how did you get such a burn on the back of your legs?"

Livy stretched her neck to inspect her rear. The calves of her legs were lobster pink. That meant that her back and shoulders must be the same. They felt stiff and prickly under her gingham shirt.

"I must have dropped off to sleep," she said.

So the morning was gone, and Ames hadn't hurried in order to be with her. He hadn't spoken to her yet. He was down by the water, setting up a deck chair for his mother, complete with footrest and striped awning.

Daphne came galloping down the slope, riding a hemlock branch.

"Giddy-ap, giddy-ap, get out of my way," she shouted.

She butted against Serena and nearly threw her.

"I told you to get out of the way!" she said angrily.

"Keep out of the way yourself!" retorted Serena. "Don't go crashing into people."

The child's clear voice was Celeste's right over again, cocksure and dictatorial, "Mumma won't let you say 'Don't' to me. Mumma says it's bad to say 'No' and 'Don't' to children. She says we should be let to do anything we want to. Roselle said 'Don't' to me and Mumma scolded her."

Livy snorted, and the child wheeled on her.

"You go away from here!" she said. "I don't like you. I

won't have you at this picnic. This is my lake and it's my picnic and I don't want you!"

Phyllis came staggering in pursuit of her sister, slipped on the pine needles and sat down hard, opened her mouth to squawl and then thought better of it, struggled up and came on again triumphantly.

"There's a nice one," said Livy in approval.

"No, she isn't nice. She's perfectly hateful," said Serena. "She stood all over my feet in the car coming out. She wouldn't sit on the seat or in Aunt Bethy's lap. She was bound she'd stand and see out, and I couldn't keep her off my pumps, and just look at the toes, all black, and it's the first time I've worn them."

Phyllis lurched against her and clutched at her dress.

"Don't touch me!" cried Serena. "Your hands are filthy!"

She gave the child a push and Phyllis sat down hard, and this time she howled in grief and surprise.

"I'm sorry, Phyllis," said Serena grudgingly. "I didn't mean to push you over. I barely touched you. You don't have to bawl like that. It can't have hurt you any."

She didn't offer to help the baby up again.

"I don't see what Rich wants to walk around the lake for in all this heat," she said. "It wasn't very nice of Gracia to send him off here ahead of the rest of us when I told her I'd be back early. If he was going off alone with anyone, just now when he's upset in his mind, he'd naturally prefer to go with me. It isn't as if you were even an old friend. He doesn't know you at all. Gracia said she wanted to get you and Rich out from under her feet because she had so much to attend to, but she makes altogether too much fuss about the few things she does around the house. She was brought up by a couple of old maids and you'd certainly know it. She's an awful old maid herself even if she was married for

a while. I really wasn't a bit surprised when Rufus got fed up on her."

"Oh," said Livy. "Weren't you?"

Ames had set up the grill and was building a fire in it. Between him and Mrs. Chelsea's deck chair, Gracia had spread out a square of oilcloth and was unpacking a hamper. Daphne was jumping up and down, crying, "I want a peanut butter sandwich! Mumma said I should have my lunch at twelve and you said it was twelve and I'm hungry!"

Family group, thought Livy. Family group on a picnic. She doesn't look in the least old-maidish. Her figure is charming and that pale blue linen dress is just right with her hair. Her face keeps turning to him, and when he asks for something, she has it ready to hand him. They look for all the world like a happily married couple, picnicking with the grandmother and the nasty small girl. Family group, and where do I fit in? Nowhere. They planned the day; they made the arrangements; they are executing the plan according to schedule, asking no help from the outside. Perfect co-operation and understanding. Complete unto themselves. He hasn't even called out to me. Is he still punishing me for my share in the cook's collapse? It's petty and unfair of him, if he is.

"I don't mean that I excuse Rufus for being unfaithful," said Serena, "but when a wife changes as much as Gracia did in the first year of marriage, you can't blame a husband much for losing interest."

"How did she change? What was she like before?"

"Oh, she was much more lively. Rufus wouldn't have married her if she hadn't been. He liked his girls responsive."

"Who doesn't?" said Livy.

"She was really vivacious, quite bubbling, almost as much so as Aunt Bethy. I think that's why they fell for each other

at sight, she and Aunt Bethy."

I'll wager that's why she stopped bubbling, thought Livy. After she'd lived with Mrs. Chelsea a while and had got a load of the eye-rolling and hand-waving, it cured her of vivacity for life. It would me.

"She was plumper, not too much so, but kind of chubby, and she had a lot of high natural color, and she wore her hair in baby curls all over her head, and she wore bright-colored sweaters and skirts. She didn't have a bit of style, but she was always awfully neat and so lively that you hardly noticed whether she was pretty or not."

"But she is pretty."

"Oh, do you think so? With that long nose?" said Serena. "It looks longer, now her face is so thin. Well, of course I know some girls settle right down, the minute they're married, and get awfully dull, and maybe that's what it was with her. She got awfully quiet and awfully inconspicuous, even about her clothes, and kind of prim, so I wasn't a bit surprised when the scandal broke."

"I don't want a chop!" Daphne was shouting in rage. "I want a peanut butter sandwich! Why didn't you bring any?"

Gracia had set out plates and cups on the blue plaid oil-cloth, two thermos jugs and a bottle of cream and a great blue kitchen bowl of what was probably salad. Mrs. Chelsea was busy buttering rolls. Daphne snatched one and began to gnaw it, perched on a boulder, banging her overalled legs against the stone.

"Come on, baby," said Livy, and lifted Phyllis to her hip.

As they approached, Daphne said, "I told you to get out of here!" and hurled her gnawed roll at Livy. Mrs. Chelsea screwed up her face in acute distress, lifting her hands in little futile gestures of apology to Livy and protest to the child.

"Please, Daffy dearest, please, please."

Mother used to say that, thought Livy.

Please, Livy. Please, Livy! patient, despairing, wholly infuriating. It had always made her want to cry, Please what? although she had usually known please what without being told. Please don't talk at the top of your lungs; I'm not deaf. Please don't bang every single door in the house as you go through, or I soon will be deaf. Please don't leave apple cores on the window sill. Please don't put your feet on the sofa when your shoes are all mud.

She had wished time and again that her mother would just let go and storm at her and even throw things. There was something exhilarating about an authentic row. It relieved the feelings marvelously. If her mother had only yelled at her, she could have yelled back. But you couldn't hit back at a patient resigned "Please, Livy."

Daffy could, of course. She was four, and public opinion and self-consciousness had not as yet got in theiricks.

"You go away, you mug, or I'll bust your head in!" she was screaming. Livy went over and took hold of her plump left wrist.

"What's that?"

Daffy broke off in mid-scream.

"It's a bracelet," she said complacently. "My daddy brought it to me. It's very expensive. He always brings me perfectly lovely presents."

The narrow band of Indian silver was set with a very small turquoise.

"It's platilum," bragged Daffy. "I expect it cost a hundred dollars. I think maybe it cost five hundred dollars. My Daddy always brings me a present when he comes home from a trip. I get more presents than anybody in Hotchkiss."

Livy's flesh crept slightly. Ordinary four-year-old show-

ing off was nothing. It was normal. But the inflections, the smug set of the baby mouth, even the way the plump wrist was stuck out, were Celeste. Daffy was Celeste right over again in spite of those blue eyes.

I wonder, I wonder how he can possibly love her, thought Livy. But he must. He married her. He lives with her. He has two children by her. And Ames says it is a perfectly happy marriage.

"I'm going to wear my platilum bracelet to Sunday School tomorrow," said Daphne, swaggering. "I'm going to wear my pink dress with the pants that match. I'm going to look perfectly beautiful."

She stuck her stomach out.

"I can sing 'Silent Night,' " she said. "Want to hear me?"

11

MIDAFTERNOON sagged. After the business of cooking and eating too much, there was nothing to do but digest. The sun grew hotter. Ames moved his mother's chair into the shade and sat near her with his back against a tree. Serena took off her enormous hat and lay flat with her head pillowed on Rich. Phyllis went to sleep in Gracia's arms.

"Let me put her in the back seat of the car," said Ames.

"She might roll off. I don't mind holding her."

"It must be like holding a stove."

"It's awfully hot," said Serena. "I'm glad my orchid is safe at home in the icebox."

Gracia looked startled.

"Was that your orchid, Serena?"

"Yes, wasn't I lucky to find exactly the kind I wanted? One of the little greenish ones with spots. I charged it to you, Ames. You said I could."

Ames saw consternation in Gracia's face.

"I thought you might have bought it for Livy," she said, "for the dance tonight."

He shook his head.

"Livy said she couldn't bear wearing flowers."

"Oh dear," said Gracia.

"Why?" asked Ames. "Did anything happen to the orchid?"

Serena sat up in a hurry.

"I should just hope nothing has happened to it! It's the only one of its kind in town. That's why I bought it. I'd rather not wear flowers at all than wear something somebody else can duplicate."

She put a hand to her husband's cheek and smiled at him.

"You'll be proud of me, honey. In ivory satin, with my green slippers, and that orchid in my hair, and not one speck of jewelry to distract from the effect, I'll be really something, I promise you."

"I'm always proud of you, whatever you have on," he said.

But there was something a little forced and preoccupied in the way he said it, and Ames wondered whether he was thinking about a part of the world where orchids grew common as weeds.

"I'm sorry about your orchid, Serena," said Gracia sadly. "You won't be wearing it tonight or ever. I'm sorry, but Daffy ate it."

"What?" shrieked Serena.

Livy gave a great whoop of laughter, "I hope she doesn't turn greenish with spots."

Gracia said, "I couldn't watch her every single minute. I was terribly rushed, packing the basket and filling the thermos jugs and trying not to spill boiling coffee on Phyllis who was under my feet all the time. Daffy explored the ice-box when my back was turned and she hid under the table and ate the orchid."

Daffy, apparently in the best of health, was racing along the shore, jabbing with a long forked stick at a fleet of leaves. Occasionally a burst of "Silent Night" came out of her, hearty and tuneless, making her elders flinch.

"I hate her," choked Serena. "I hate her. I hope it makes her sick. I hope it kills her."

Elspeth was horrified.

"Oh, dearest, don't say such a thing. She didn't mean any harm. She's too little to know better. Children will eat the most appalling things to find out what they are. Why, when Ames was Daffy's age I never knew what I'd find in his mouth."

Ames recoiled, but short of downright rudeness to his mother, there was no way of checking the flow of reminiscence about himself when young. He set his teeth and tried not to listen. It wasn't so much that the stories made him feel like a fool as that his mother's manner of telling made her such a bore. Poor little dear, all she wanted was to entertain, but the urgency of her want defeated her purpose. She had no power of selection; she gave every detail, overemphasizing the least important ones; she rambled; she attached an entire family tree and school record to every person she mentioned; she batted her eyes and gestured madly; she interrupted herself with breathless laughter before she explained what seemed to her desperately funny; she built up drama where none was; she lost the thread, she fumbled, tried to think back to where she had started, and petered out, with apologies, to nothing.

The poor little dear. She was being deadly tiresome, and he knew Livy thought so and he couldn't prevent her thinking so; but let her just show it; let her dare to so much as yawn or wriggle, and he would be down on her like a ton of bricks. It was all very well for Serena to bury her face in Rich and go off to sleep. It was all very well for Rich and Gracia to shut off their consciousness without pretense of listening. His mother wasn't looking to them for response; they had all heard the stories many times, and anyway, she was sure of their affection and felt no need to impress or amuse them. Livy was her audience, and Livy only, to be

won over and captivated.

The audience was suffering; he could see that all right. Her eyes were glassy; the corners of her beautiful mouth drooped; her shoulders drooped; her spine was a listless curve. Her face was fully as expressive as his mother's but not in his mother's frantically animated way. She looked trapped and tormented, weighted down with pity not for his mother but for herself.

Watching her suffering, he felt a bitter kind of satisfaction in it. Let her get a good dose of boredom and see how she liked it. Let her see what most people had for a daily diet, the irritation of petty domestic trivia. Most people led dull lives and put up with dullness and had to pretend to like it. Livy wasn't a good pretender. She had had too little practice. Judging by what she had told him about herself in the past ten years, she had never been forced to put up for long with anything that bored her. For ten years, apparently, she had been drifting about the country, free as air, getting away with murder.

The freedom she had had, the irresponsibility that seemed to have been almost invulnerability, attracted him to her more than he had ever been attracted to any woman; but it rankled, too. What business had she to have got away with murder? Men did, if they had their wits about them, and didn't make the mistake of falling in love too young, and weren't saddled with dependent relatives, or had plenty of money to start with. And girls did, sometimes, if they had plenty of money or really great beauty or complete ruthlessness, none of which Livy possessed.

What she did have was tremendous vitality, self-confidence, and warmth. It was surprising that at twenty-eight she was still unmarried. Perhaps her brother's marital catastrophes had made her wary. She must certainly have had

love affairs; her vitality alone was enough to attract men to her; but it would be like her, thought Ames with resentment, to walk out on a love affair when it hampered her, and start over somewhere else, unscathed, with a whole skin and a light heart. He didn't for a moment believe her to be superficial, but he guessed that she had an excellent forgettery, and that what was out of sight went out of her mind fairly soon.

She excited him, and at times the excitement was wholly pleasurable, but at times, without warning and not always with reason, it changed into real animosity. She brought out a streak of cruelty in him that he hadn't supposed he had. He wanted her; he was sure that she wanted him; he wasn't at all sure that she could ever fit into his placid daily life or into his family, or that, if she tried it, she could and would stick it. He wasn't going to have his life knocked into a cocked hat by any girl, however much he wanted her. He was nearly thirty. He had got along well enough so far. He had two women on his hands already; he was responsible for them and he loved them; he wasn't going to injure them for anyone, even a wife. He almost wished he had never set eyes on Livy; but having seen her, how could he ever again be contented with what had satisfied him before?

"And then the town took over this pond for a reservoir," his mother was saying, "and Daddy never rebuilt the shack. We come out only for picnics. Ames doesn't care about fishing."

"I was wondering why there weren't any cottages," Livy said, gulping down a yawn. "I was thinking how nice it would be to sleep out here on broiling summer nights, right on the shore, with only the stars for a roof."

"Oh, you couldn't, the mosquitoes are terrible, big as this, and bloodthirsty," his mother showed how large they were,

and hunched her narrow shoulders and winced as if she were being attacked by a swarm of the monsters. "And it's actually hotter out here in midsummer than it is in town. The woods cut off the breeze. It's much more comfortable in a house with electric fans and plenty of ice. I always tell Ames we're better off at home in the hot weather than we would be at some noisy crowded resort. We shut the windows the first thing in the morning and pull the shades down, and we don't let a breath of outdoor air inside till the middle of the evening when it begins to cool off, and when we go to bed we leave all the bedroom doors wide open and that lets a cross draft into all the rooms."

"Open bedroom doors aren't so good," said Livy, "when the snoring starts."

His mother turned painfully pink.

"Oh, but I don't, do I, Gracia? I know that old people usually do, and I worry about it, I don't want to be a nuisance and I'd put a clothespin on my nose if I thought it would prevent me, or would that make it worse?"

Drat Livy for bringing it up, thought Ames in despair. His mother didn't snore but she fretted constantly for fear she might. She knew from experience what a trial it could be. His father had been a mighty snorer, a very Jove complete with thunder.

"I thought perhaps Ames snored," said Livy mildly. "Hank used to when he slept on his back. I'd have to go in and sit on his chest to stop him."

Daffy came running up, breathless with haste and stress.

"I have to go to the bathroom, quick! Quick! Uncle Ames, quick, I can't wait!"

"Damn," he said. "You're old enough to go by yourself."

"I don't want to go by myself!" she wriggled and twisted. "The bushes bite me!"

"Oh, go with her, dearest," his mother pleaded. "You know last time she sat in some poison ivy. Please, dearest."

Gracia handed the sleeping baby to Ames.

"Come, Daffy. I'll take you."

Ames put the baby down and she woke and whimpered.

"I wish Celeste would come, if she's coming," he snapped.

"They're her kids. Let her tend to them."

Livy's head jerked round.

"Is she coming?"

"She said they would if Charles felt like it. He isn't much on family gatherings in the out of doors. We needn't wait for them if you're tired, Mother. We could start back right now."

"Oh, I'm not a bit tired," her denial was so vivacious that he knew she was very tired, but if the party broke up now she would feel responsible. He shouldn't have asked her. "I love it out here. Let's wait for Celeste and Charles. They're sure to be along any minute, and if we started back and met them in that narrow road it would be too awful, having to back for miles."

There was a wild screech from the woods.

"Daffy!" gasped Elspeth, her eyes wild. "Ames! A snake!"

"There aren't any in these woods, Mother."

The screech was repeated, "Mumma! Mumma!"

"She isn't screaming for help," said Ames. "She's screaming a welcome. She's got better ears than I have. I didn't hear the car till after she yelled."

Livy stood up. She came over near him and touched his shoulder lightly with her hand, almost, he thought, as if she needed reassurance. The possibility of any such need in her moved him, and he reached up and gave her hand a quick hard squeeze. Her eyes were almost apprehensive.

"Don't let Celeste get you down," he said under his breath.

"She doesn't bother me any."

"Of course not," he said. "No reason why she should. But she does most people."

"Not me," said Livy. But she looked extremely sober.

"Well, you certainly don't mind Charles, do you?"

Her eyes had never looked so large. It was partly the thick curling blackness of her lashes.

"I don't mind him," she said slowly, "but I don't feel at ease with him. I don't know at all where I am with him."

"That's better than the way it is with Celeste," said Ames. "You always know exactly where you are with her and you wish to God you were some place else."

The Brittain car stopped beside the Chelsea car, and Daffy came tearing out of the woods.

"Mumma, you button me!"

Celeste and Charles got out of the car, and Charles turned his back on his wife and child. He came through the trees toward Ames and Livy, moving at a leisurely pace, bare-headed, graceful for so tall a man, a hand in his pocket as usual. He didn't smile or wave. His face was without expression.

"That winter complexion of his is pretty ghastly," said Ames in Livy's ear. "He's not bad-looking after he's tanned a bit."

"He's not bad-looking," said Livy faintly.

"Looks older than he is," said Ames. "Doesn't he look older than thirty-four?"

"I don't know," she said. "I never can judge people's ages. I thought, when I first met you, that you were younger than I. And when I jumped off the train yesterday and saw you in that high-necked long-sleeved tight black sweater, after six weeks of remembering you in tweeds, I thought you looked like a nice schoolboy whose mother had brushed your

hair just before you left the house."

He was annoyed beyond all reason. People had always taken him for less than his years. Rufus' kid brother. Rufus' little brother. Isn't he ever going to get his growth? He isn't going to hit chandeliers like Rufus, is he?

He was fair height now. He knew it. He towered over his mother and Gracia, and with Rufus and his father no longer at home to tower over him, he felt tall enough. But there were times when he stood near Richmond Howes, or even Charles, and suddenly he was Shrimp Chelsea again, and he didn't like it.

Abruptly he stepped back, away from Livy, who was taller than a girl, his girl, had any business to be.

"Watch where you're going!" said Rich angrily. "You nearly trod on Serena's hand."

Ames looked down at his sleeping cousin.

"Time she woke up."

He prodded her hip.

"Wake up, Mrs. Howes. Sleeping all the time will make you fat. You don't want to spread, do you, Mrs. Howes?"

She rolled over and rubbed her eyes.

"Have I been asleep? Heavens, I must look simply awful."

"You don't," said Rich. "You look lovely, honey."

She leaned across and kissed him.

"You must be paralyzed, sitting still with me asleep on you. Give me my compact, will you? I put it in your pocket before luncheon."

It would be pleasant, thought Ames, to have a pretty wife who loved you blindly and abysmally the way Serena loved her big baboon. To her, everything he did and said and wanted was perfect. She might not be very bright, but certainly she was loving, and certainly she was a pleasant eye-ful and armful, and all she seemed to care about in the world was

pleasing him and keeping him contented. It wasn't her fault or her wish that an accidental baby was wrecking his plans for the next few months.

Beyond the Howes, Charles was standing a few steps from Livy, looking at her with his habitual little half-smile that wasn't in the least a sneer yet always had a touch of the supercilious.

"You must find our simple small-town pleasures somewhat boring," he said.

"If you mean picnics," she rapped out sharply, "I like them very much indeed. And I'm never bored."

Ames almost laughed out loud. Brave girl, after what his mother had put her through. But why did she have to be so sharp with Charles, who was harmless enough? Of course she wasn't used to that languid half-alive manner of his. It might be exasperating to anyone so downright and vigorous as she was.

She began to speak rapidly, and rather loudly, almost as if she were arguing with someone, "We used to have a picnic like this every Saturday when Hank and I were kids. Pa liked cooking out of doors as much as we did. He said things tasted better out of doors, and that hurt Mother's feelings, but it shouldn't have because things do taste better out of doors, I don't know why, and our picnics saved her working over a hot stove at home. But she wasn't at all a reasonable being, and she disapproved or was afraid of practically everything that was any fun."

She wasn't just reminiscing for the fun of it or to be entertaining, either, as his mother had. Something had got under her skin. She was tense and combative. Ames went over and stood close by her, his back against a tree trunk. It wasn't that he felt she needed protection; nothing so absurd as that; because what did she need protection from,

158

except too much of his family? But if Charles made her edgy, it was understandable and excusable. He often made Ames edgy, too.

"Did you have a lake close by your town, Livy?"

Her quick glance was grateful; he couldn't imagine why. As if she felt herself in for a struggle of some sort, and needed his help, and longed for it, but hadn't expected it and wouldn't ask for it. He felt a pang of remorse. Certainly she had received no help from him so far during the week end. Whenever a moment of tension or a slight misunderstanding had occurred, he had blamed her instantly, in his mind, and let her see that he blamed her, siding with his family against her. Why was he so critical of her when he was in love with her? Was it because he was in love with her, and wanted her, fully aware that he could take her but wasn't sure he could keep her after he had her? He wanted to force her to get on with his family so that, married to him, she could be content.

"We didn't have a lake," she said, "but we had a glen full of ferns with a waterfall splashing down into it. I slipped on the moss at the top of the falls once and landed on my head in the pool below."

"My God," said Ames, "why didn't you break your neck?"

"Because the pool was quite deep, and because the waterfall wasn't very high and it didn't come straight down. It slanted. I made a lovely splash."

"Didn't you hurt yourself at all?"

"Oh, I broke my collarbone. I remember how mad I was at the almighty fuss Mother made. She couldn't have carried on worse if I'd killed myself."

"You must have been a hellion."

"I wasn't a hellion. I never went around looking for

trouble or making trouble just for the hell of it. I had accidents, but so do most people when they're young and clumsy. Mother said I didn't look where I was going. Hank got into a lot more trouble than I ever did, but I was scolded more than he was, not because Mother liked him any better than she did me but because she gave up trying to tame him; Pa convinced her fairly early that it was natural and inevitable for a boy to plunge around and smash things and make a racket. But she thought a girl should walk softly and keep her voice and her skirt down, and sit and sew instead of climbing trees."

"The poor woman," said Ames. "I'll bet she was white-haired at thirty. She had you early, you said."

"She ought never to have had me at all, or Hank, either," said Livy. "But that would have been hard on Pa. He was crazy for children. I guess she ought not to have married at all. She didn't have any fun out of being married or out of having us children around. She fussed too much, and worried about our manners and our morals, and she was forever telling us what not to do, and of course we went and did it. Pa didn't help her with discipline at all. He just laughed. He thought we were swell. Finally, when we got to be fourteen and fifteen, he made her lay off us. He told her her everlasting fussing would do us more harm than good and that, given time, public opinion would teach us all we needed to know about decent behavior, like washing behind the ears and not committing adultery."

Ames winced. He hoped his mother hadn't heard. Since Rufus' trouble, nobody spoke lightly about adultery before his mother.

"Pa was perfectly right, too. There's nothing stricter or stronger than public opinion in a town the size of Littlefield.

You can't get away with anything for long, because everybody is interested in your private life, and critical of it, and you have to behave or get out, isn't that so?"

It was so. Rufus had been obliged to get out. In larger places, when divorces were friendly, if divorces ever really were, husbands and ex-wives might be able to go on living in the same part of town, meeting at the same parties, going to the same church, perhaps. But not in Hotchkiss.

"Pa was right," said Livy again, "but he ought to have made Mother stop fussing at us earlier. She marked Hank for life; I swear she did. She brought him up to be so darned chivalrous and noble that whenever he's attracted to a girl he thinks he has to marry her to protect her from his own base impulses."

Ames burst into helpless laughter.

"I'm serious, Ames. I blame Mother for Hank's idiotic marriage his first year in college. But Mother blamed Pa for it. She nearly went off her head about it. She said Pa had never warned Hank enough about the perils of sex. So what did she do from then on but concentrate on me. There I was in my last high school year, a great girl perfectly able to take care of myself, and Mother wringing her hands and thinking I was ruined every time I stayed out after eleven at night. When I went to college she kept expecting the worst, and when I disappeared without warning she thought of course I'd eloped. As if I'd be likely to tie myself up in a hasty marriage after the trouble that Hank's had made for him. Why, I'd about as soon have walked into the jaws of a bear trap. I was leery of marriage for years. If Mother marked Hank, I guess Hank's mistakes marked me. They made me determined to keep out of marriage until I was sure I could stay married for keeps. Annulments and divorces

cause too much misery all round."

Fortunately Gracia was some way off, talking with Celeste. Livy's tongue was running away with her. Why couldn't she at least look around to see who was within ear-shot? Yesterday she hadn't known about Gracia's divorce but today she knew all right. She just didn't stop to think, that was all. Being careful was too much effort. The only caution she had ever learned, apparently, was the caution that had kept her out of an early marriage.

"I guess Pa is leery of marriage, too," she said more cheerfully. "All the widows and spinsters in Littlefield are inviting him to dinner, but they haven't a chance. He really was fond of Mother and used to her, and her death was a shock, but I think in a way it was sort of a relief, too. She wasn't a happy woman; she didn't get any real fun out of being alive and she did her dutiful best to keep other people from having any fun. Pa misses her, of course, but he's having a fine time. He lives at Aunt Min's; she's his sister and very much like him, easygoing and hearty. He's free to play poker every night in the week if he wants to, and go off fishing for a week at a time with Dr. Moffat and the Fenimore brothers. You'd like my little Pa, Ames, even if you don't like fishing. You ought to meet him some time."

"Is he really little?"

"Six feet three and a half," she said. "Two hundred and ten."

Celeste was speaking with severity as she came up to them, "Ames, you should have told me you'd taken Mrs. Prout for x-rays. You must see how it affects my arrangements. If Mrs. Prout has cancer she'll be laid up for months, and that means Roselle will have to live at home and take care of her, and I'll have to break in a new maid. It's very inconvenient

for me, coming just now, when I'm so busy with the school committee and the Red Cross."

Now his mother would have a fit. Confound Celeste. He had meant to say nothing about Mrs. Prout and the x-rays to his mother until he was sure there was nothing important to tell.

"Ames, Ames," she was beckoning to him feebly, her little face screwed up as if in acute pain.

"I'll have to talk to her," he muttered to Celeste. "Clear out, will you, all of you?"

Celeste said, "Now, Mother, there's no sense in getting all upset about Mrs. Prout. It's entirely her own fault if she's past cure now. She ought to have consulted a doctor long ago. I don't see why old people are so unmanageable and irrational. Like you about your teeth. Phyllis, take your thumb out. Come along, we'll go down to the pier and see if there are any little fishes in the water."

"You clear out, too, Livy, will you?" said Ames under his breath.

She went reluctantly and Charles followed. Rich and Serena were strolling with clasped hands along the water's edge. Gracia's eyes met Ames' with a question. At his beseeching look, she moved to his mother's chair and reached out for Elspeth's hand.

"Now, Mother," he said soothingly, "you're not to worry. It may not be anything serious."

"Oh, but it is," she whispered. Her face was stricken.

He sat down on the footrest of her chair and patted her bony ankle.

"Dr. Cheney said he'd let us know about the x-rays first thing on Monday morning. It may be nothing worse than bad temper and acid stomach."

“It is worse,” she whispered tragically. “Much, much worse, Ames. I’m not talking about Mrs. Prout. I’m talking about Livy. Oh, Ames, you mustn’t marry her. She’s cruel! She’ll break your heart. She’ll break all our hearts. Oh, Ames!”

12

IF his mother had bared her teeth and begun to howl like a wolf, he could hardly have been more shocked. In his whole memory of her, he had never had to be ashamed of her or for her. He had never had to fight her.

"I've tried to like her, dearest. I've always tried to like anyone you liked. I've never criticized your choice of friends, have I? I've never interfered with you, have I? I wouldn't now if I weren't frightened for you, Ames."

That was what made the attack so shocking. She never had interfered. She never had criticized. What had come over her? He had supposed that he knew her by heart. But now she was someone he didn't know at all, a querulous unreasonable old woman with distracted pale blue eyes, that bulged a little, with a long obstinate-looking upper lip, and withered hands that fluttered meaninglessly.

"If you marry her, Ames, she'll ruin your life, because you're kind and you can be badly hurt and she's cruel and hard."

He was more embarrassed than angry; embarrassed and heartsick. She had always been such a good little thing, never a nuisance; self-controlled and tactful and sweet; she had been shrewd enough to manage her children by indirection, during their growing up, if she had managed at all; she had left the heavy parent business to their father. She had never

attempted to choose their friends or their sweethearts; if she had disapproved of the ones they selected, she never showed it until long after the undesirable companions had been discarded.

"Mother, you don't know what you're saying."

He couldn't snub her. He couldn't scold her. She wasn't herself. She was a fretful embarrassing old woman, unknown to him, saying things to him that nobody had any right to say, tearing his privacy to pieces with her tremulous hands.

Gracia, white-faced, as shocked as he was, wanted to get away, but Elspeth had a desperate clutch on her hand and cried, "No, no, don't leave us, Gracia. I haven't anything to say that you can't hear, and if I say the wrong things or too much, you can stop me."

But nobody could stop her now. Already she had said too much and all of it was wrong. She hurried on, frightened and desperate, "If Livy were just someone you might like to know as a casual acquaintance, it wouldn't matter whether any of us liked her or not. But you aren't casual about her. She has a bad effect on you. You've been unlike yourself ever since she came into the house. You've been restless and moody all the spring, ever since you met her, I suppose. You're more absorbed in her than I've ever seen you absorbed in any girl. You're falling in love with her, if you aren't in love with her already."

Gracia had sunk to the ground beside the deck chair, making herself as small as possible, keeping so still that she seemed to be holding her breath, as if she hoped that by ceasing to breathe she could cease to be there at all and could disappear into the ground.

He appealed to her for help without looking at her or speaking aloud, Help me, help me, Gracia. Nobody else can.

"Ames, dearest, I can't sit back and let you rush blindly

into misery. If my saying these things makes you hate me, I shall just have to bear your hatred, but I can't let you ruin yourself without trying to stop you."

What could he say to her?

He couldn't say, I haven't yet decided to marry Livy. That was nobody's business but Livy's and his.

He couldn't say, I don't know whether she'll have me or not. I invited her here to take a good look at what marriage with me would involve, and one good look may be too much for her. She may decide to look farther before she ties herself up in a life sentence. She may prefer to pick a nice grown-up male orphan, the way Celeste did.

Naturally he couldn't and wouldn't say all that to his mother. He couldn't and wouldn't believe it himself. Without conceit, he believed that if he asked Livy to marry him, she would have him.

It would be exciting and lovely, being married to her. Living with her, sleeping with her, waking up in the morning and finding her there, coming home at night and finding her there. It would be wonderful.

Having children by her. He smiled. Livy's children wouldn't be daughters.

She would like having a swarm of young vigorous sons about her. She would know how to get along with little boys.

"You're smiling," his mother moaned. "You think I'm a fool to say anything against her because already you've decided to marry her and nothing I say can stop you. You're in love with her already, and already she's changed you. You laughed when she said those horrible things about her poor dead mother. You listened to what she said and you laughed!"

"Livy didn't say anything horrible, Mother."

"She did. She criticized her mother simply for trying to be a good mother. She was contemptuous of her. She made fun of her. She said her mother's death was a relief."

Perhaps Livy had sounded like that, more hard-boiled than she really was. And Elspeth was quick to take to herself any criticism of any mother. The possibility that her own death might be a relief to her children would torture her.

"You mustn't judge Livy by the way she talks, Mother. Most people our age talk that way, but we've never done it before you because you always take things personally and misunderstand and get hurt feelings."

He couldn't say, Perhaps we've been too tender with you. You've never really got acquainted with our generation. You're two generations older than we are instead of one. You might be our grandmother instead of our mother. You've led too sheltered a life for your own good, perhaps, or ours. Dad shielded you and taught us to shield you. Even Celeste was careful not to bully you while he was alive.

"You mean," asked Elspeth in anguish, "that you discuss me behind my back? Criticize me for the way I brought you up? Look forward to my death as a relief?"

He groaned.

"Mother, of course we don't. What I mean is that we're more outspoken than your generation was. We're more candid but we're no less kind. Livy is really no different from the rest of us. She isn't cruel. She isn't nearly so hard-boiled as she pretends to be."

"She wasn't pretending, Ames. She meant everything she said. That's what made it so awful."

He had used the wrong word, and his mother had caught him up on it. If Livy was anything, she was honest. His mother was right about that.

Livy had meant what she said, but that didn't mean she was cruel. He couldn't have fallen in love with her if she had been.

He wanted to say, Compared to your own daughter, Livy is kindness and tact itself.

But saying that wouldn't help Livy's case, because Elspeth was bitterly afraid of Celeste. She had been hurt and humiliated by her time and again, but always she excused it and continued to be loving because Celeste was her own. Livy was not. Livy was the stranger, the intruder in the family, the possible destroyer of peace and security.

"No, she doesn't pretend. That's true. I used the wrong word. What I mean is, she sounds harsher than she really is. She isn't callous, Mother. She isn't cruel. She's warm and tender and kind."

"To you, perhaps," his mother flashed with a boldness quite unlike her, born of her desperation, "because she's in love with you and wants to marry you. Naturally she'd be warm and tender with you. But she was cold to me from the moment she first saw me. I had my arms and my heart open to take her in, and she held me off. She was suspicious and unfriendly. She didn't love her own mother and she'll never make any effort to love your mother. She's hostile to me simply because I love you and she knows you're fond of me."

It was no use explaining that he was himself to blame for that first coldness and stiffness in Livy. He had warned her to be careful and his warnings had made her nervous and self-conscious.

It was no use explaining anything. It was all a ghastly mess.

He controlled himself with an effort. His nerves were shrieking.

"Mother, you're misjudging Livy and that isn't like you. It's hard on a girl to come into a close-knit family like this

and have to get acquainted with all of us all at once. She's under considerable strain, and she hasn't had a chance to get acquainted with you yet or you with her. You haven't had any time alone together. She was plunged into family excitement almost at once, Rich's expedition and Serena's baby, and in certain quarters," he tried to laugh, to break the tension, "she received a hell of a welcome. The cat scratched her and young Daffy slapped her."

"A child's instinct about people is usually right," said Elspeth.

My God, he thought wildly, what's the use? What's the use? I might as well give up.

Gracia, help me.

He struggled to speak with lightness, "Gracia is the one who can tell you what Livy is really like, Mother. Gracia is the only one who has had a chance to get acquainted with her. They were awake half the night, whispering like a couple of schoolgirls. I could hear them through the wall. I thought they'd never quiet down and go to sleep. I had to go in and speak sharply to them, didn't I, Gracia?"

He smiled at her. Her pale lips parted a little but she said nothing. It was as if she had tried so hard to efface herself that her colors had actually faded and her voice rusted away past use.

"You'll trust Gracia's judgment, Mother, I know, when you won't trust mine. If Gracia likes Livy, you know Livy must be all right. And you do like her, don't you, Gracia?"

Help me, Gracia.

"Yes, I like her, Ames."

Her voice was only a little rusty after so long and painful a keeping silent.

She never failed him when he needed help. She was always on his side. She could quiet and reassure his mother when

no one else could. The love and understanding between his mother and her was extraordinary. Elspeth might have been forgiven if her acceptance of Rufus' wife had been a trifle grudging; Rufus, the eldest child, the adored elder son, the first child to marry. But Elspeth and Gracia had loved each other at sight.

Ames thought with a touch of rancor, I might say, Mother, you approved of Rufus' choice, yet see how that marriage turned out. Your disapproval of Livy may be the best possible omen for the success of my marriage.

He could never say such a thing. He could never hurt his mother that much.

He looked at her hopelessly. Gracia's words had had no slightest effect upon her. Why had he supposed that they would? His mother was no longer a reasonable being. She had made up her mind to hate Livy, and hate her she would.

What's the use? he thought. I might just as well give up. My house has two Mrs. Chelseas in it already. Adding a third would make it a battlefield. I couldn't stand it and neither could Livy. She wouldn't.

From the pier Livy's voice rang out, "Don't do that!" and Celeste's instant rebuke was passionless but firm in the still air, "Livy, I'd rather you kept to the positive when you speak to the children."

There was a wild screech and a splash, another splash, and Ames saw Livy thigh-deep in the water beside the pier, hauling Daffy and Phyllis out by their overall straps.

"The babies!" gasped Elspeth. "They're drowning!"

"Oh, no, they're not," said Ames. "They'd float, anyhow, they're so fat, mostly blubber. Livy's wringing them out and putting them back on the pier to dry."

Elspeth tried to raise herself from the low canvas chair and he picked her up and hugged her against his side. With

the babies in any trouble, she was herself again, not the querulous stranger who had been tormenting him. She ought to be pleased with Livy for jumping in after the children. The water wasn't deep but deep enough to give them a bad scare.

Daffy, dripping on the pier, roared, "Mumma, she pushed me in! She's bad! Mumma, Mumma, Livy pushed me in the water!"

Elspeth gave Ames a terrible look.

"Now perhaps you'll believe what I said about Livy. Now perhaps you'll admit that she's cruel."

"Daffy's only shooting off her mouth, Mother. Of course Livy didn't push her in."

His mother said, "Gracia, bring the picnic basket, dearest. We must go home at once. The children must get into dry clothes at once or they'll catch cold."

"Nobody could catch cold on a day like this, Mother. I envy them," said Ames. "I wish I'd fallen in, even if it is town water."

He folded up the deck chair and carried it under one arm, helping her over the rough ground with the other. It was the first time he could remember her ever having been reluctant at accepting his help. She was in a fancy state of nerves and so was he.

They all gathered by the three cars, Daffy still bellowing as Celeste stripped the wet overalls off her. Gracia peeled Phyllis who appeared to have enjoyed her dip.

"Be quiet, Daffy," said Celeste. "A ducking never hurt anyone, and it's silly to howl when you aren't hurt. Falling into the water is a good way to learn to swim. It's time you learned to swim. You're four years old. I must arrange for you to have lessons this summer at the Y pool."

"I didn't fall in!" howled Daffy. "Livy pushed me!"

"Don't tell lies, Daffy," said Ames.

Automatically his sister rebuked him, "I'd rather you left out the 'Don't' when you speak to the children, Ames."

He wanted to hit her. He was furious with her and with his mother and with his abominable little niece.

"And besides," said Livy, chuckling, "I did push her."

The rage inside him exploded.

All right, he thought. All right. This finishes it. I've had enough. Damn them all. Damn all women.

"Celeste," said Elspeth, "put my sweater around Daffy. I'll ride back in your car and hold her."

So she wouldn't even ride in the same car with Livy. All right. All right. What did it matter? By Monday morning Livy would be gone forever, and he could start forgetting her.

The Brittain car went first. Rich and Serena followed on its tail.

"We can ride three in front," Ames held the door open for Gracia, giving her no choice. "Get in."

He wanted her between himself and Livy. Throughout the rest of the hellish week end he would keep her between himself and Livy.

"Oh, I'll have to ride in the back anyway," said Livy cheerfully. "I'm wet. But I can sit on the rug. I wish I'd gone in all over while I was about it. The water was lovely and cold."

As Ames started the car, she laughed in real enjoyment.

"I never took more satisfaction in anything than I did in giving that little brute a good hard shove. She pushed Phyllis in so I pushed her in."

"She pushed Phyllis?" repeated Gracia. "Did Celeste see that?"

"I don't know whether she did or not. No, I guess she

didn't because I was between the children and her. Daffy was looking for minnows and the baby wanted to see, too, and Daffy shoved her away and I yelled at her. Then she gave the baby another shove that toppled her over the edge of the pier. I'm not surprised that Daffy thinks she can get away with any amount of cussedness when her mother takes time out to discuss the negative instead of lambasting her in the positive."

"I'd better explain to Celeste exactly what happened," said Gracia.

"Why?"

"Because she doesn't welcome interference in the way she disciplines the children, and she may have thought that you pushed Daffy in simply because the child has been so hateful to you."

"But she couldn't think such a thing!" exclaimed Livy. "How could she? I'm an adult. It isn't as if Daffy were my size."

"You said you didn't like children," Gracia reminded her. Livy lay back in the seat.

"Oh, hell," she said airily. "I don't care what she thinks."

No, thought Ames, enraged, you don't care. You act first and think afterward or else you don't think at all until someone else makes you, and even then you just don't care.

Gracia, beside him, knew the signs of his wrath.

He's through, she thought. When he gets as angry as this, he never forgets what caused the trouble. She's made nothing but trouble since she came here, and he's had enough.

She could afford to be generous to Livy now. She could afford the "Yes, I like her, Ames," that he had wrenched out of her. It had cost her a good deal. But now she could like Livy without half trying, and it would cost her nothing.

The week end had served its purpose. It wasn't half over

and already Ames was in one of his sullen rages. He wasn't speaking to Livy. He was ignoring her. He was keeping his attention on his driving, although he knew the woods road like the palm of his hand and could follow it blind. Livy, ignored, had to ride by herself in the back seat.

I didn't do it, thought Gracia. I don't have to feel guilty about it, or sorry for her. I didn't lift a finger or utter a word to turn him from her. I wanted this to happen but I didn't help it to happen.

He'll never marry her. His marrying her would have been a catastrophe. He sees that. Already in his mind he has given her up. For him the week end is already over. Whatever it signified between them is over.

He'd never be happy with her. Rufus could have been happy with her. She's thick-skinned and simple-minded, the way he was, and sublimely self-confident, with no imagination about the sensitiveness of others. She's like Rufus. He could have married her and been perfectly happy.

Ames is like me. Ames should be married to me.

He stopped the car at the curb in front of his house. He crossed the lawn with a girl on each side of him but he looked at neither.

"I've got to have a tub," said Livy. "It'll make my sun-burn boil but I have to have it."

Gracia went into the tiny front hall, but Livy lingered in the doorway, looking back.

"What's the matter, darling?"

"Nothing," he said curtly. "Shut the screen. You'll fill the house with flies."

Gracia trembled. The fury in his voice! She wanted to flee, although the fury was not for her. Her feet were rooted to the floor.

"You'd better tell me what the matter is," said Livy, "since

something obviously is the matter.”

“If you don’t know,” he said, “what’s the use of my wasting breath to explain?”

Gracia gasped.

“Oh,” said Livy politely, after a moment’s pause, “oh, I see. If that’s how it is, there’s no need to explain.”

She went up the stairs, quickly and lightly, and into the bathroom and Gracia heard the water gush merrily into the tub.

She doesn’t in the least realize, thought Gracia. She hasn’t the faintest inkling. Thick-skinned and simple-minded.

If he had spoken to me like that, she thought, my heart would have stopped beating for good and all.

13

So that's how it is, thought Livy. It's settled already and the week end isn't even half over. Well, now I know. At least I needn't wonder any more. I needn't even worry. I don't have to be careful. All I have to do is live through the hours and when Monday morning comes I can leave.

The lukewarm water came up to her chin. She liked a bath hot enough to boil her, usually, but her back and shoulders and the calves of her legs were boiling even in the lukewarm water. The burn wasn't deep. Not serious. Not enough to be sick with. She'd had a sunburn once that had kept her laid up for a week.

It would have been a nice touch, she thought, if I'd had to stay in this house a week, being nursed and waited on, after what's happened. Well, at least I'm spared that. I don't know enough to come in out of the sun, but I know enough to leave when the week end is over. I suppose I'll have to send his mother a bread and butter note. Dear Mrs. Chelsea, Thank you for giving me a lovely week end. It has ruined the rest of my life.

No, that's bathos. It hasn't ruined anything more than the next four years. It seems to take me that long to get over an affair of the heart.

I thought I was using my head this time along with my heart. I thought I was being very clear-headed and open-

eyed about it. I didn't see what could possibly go wrong this time.

Nothing was wrong but my judgment. I'm just like Hank. I pick the wrong people to fall in love with. Hank picked three times and every one was a lemon. And it's proved to be the same with me. Three strikes and out.

In Gracia's bedroom she helped herself to Gracia's cold cream and rubbed it into her sunburn. Gracia was probably downstairs wrestling with dinner.

He probably blames me for that, too, she thought. For Mrs. Prout's tantrum and Gracia having to take over kitchen-maid duties. But Gracia likes it. Getting breakfast with his assistance made her eyes shine and her cheeks pink. Taking over in a minor domestic crisis probably makes her feel more important to him. Perhaps eventually he'll tumble to how she feels about him and he'll marry her. Or maybe he'd rather stay an old maid all his life. An old maid with a cat and a mother and a sister-in-law.

Her fingers were slippery with cold cream and the jar slipped from her fingers and fell to the rug with a thud.

He isn't an old maid. He isn't! But he's lived so long with women that he lets trifles get under his skin. He isn't womanish. I couldn't have fallen in love with him if he had been. He will be, though, if he goes on like this, and he will; he'll have to, till his mother dies, and then he'll marry Gracia; he'll have to; they can't share a house together, just the two of them. Hotchkiss wouldn't let them. He might as well marry her now. She's already well broken in as a daughter-in-law. She's adjusted to his relatives and his moods. Perhaps, with her, he doesn't indulge in moods.

He's very very fond of her, she thought, sitting before Gracia's mirror to brush her hair. He wouldn't have been so mad about Mrs. Prout's tantrum if it hadn't thrown the

dirty work on Gracia. He was icy to me all through breakfast. I wasn't entirely to blame for Mrs. Prout's blowing up. Florence did her part. I didn't walk in the lemon meringue pies. All I did was ask for a cup of coffee. Please, mister, can you let me have a nickel?

He doesn't blame Florence. He only laughs at her or cuffs her. He doesn't laugh at me. If he'd cuff me and then get over being mad, I wouldn't mind so much. I could hit him back. But he freezes over. He shuts himself up in himself. He shuts me out. He doesn't excuse me for anything, not one tiny thing. I'm to blame for everything that goes wrong during the whole week end. I'm invited here for a week end and I find I'm on trial for my life and everything I say and do will be held against me.

She brushed her heavy hair that was like her mother's hair and she thought, If only Mother had been willing to have it cut, she wouldn't have had so many headaches. She thought our rampaging around was to blame for her headaches, and she let us think so, too.

Mother was prettier than I am, she thought, looking dispassionately into the soft black eyes that were exactly like her mother's eyes. Very much prettier than I am, and Pa fell in love with her looks and she married him, expecting to be happy, because girls married as soon as they could in her day, and they still do. But she'd have been happier if she hadn't married anyone. I know she would. And I'll never be really happy unless I marry; and I probably never will. Hank and I fall in love with the wrong people. But he marries them, and I don't.

She slapped on powder and rubbed lipstick in with her finger, and she thought, I never looked better in my life. Why don't I look the way I feel inside? As if I'd already died. The way Carl looks. As if he'd been dead for years and had

no business to be up and walking around.

Well, he's one person who'll be thankful to see me leave this town, she thought. It doesn't matter now that he wouldn't acknowledge me as an old friend. It doesn't matter a bit now; in fact, it's better; but it might have made trouble for all of us if I'd married Ames and stayed on here, because you can't keep a secret forever in a town this size, and a secret that's been kept for years always seems worse than it is when it's finally discovered. Anything that's been kept shut up for years smells pretty bad when it's finally opened up. It smells of mothballs, or dust and mice, or decay and death.

She slipped the black dress over her head. It was a pity she had forgotten to bring the jacket. It would have covered her parboiled back and shoulders.

She had packed in a terrific hurry, a joyful dither. She had jumped into her bath with her wrist watch on. Why, that was only yesterday morning, she thought, amazed. Only a few hours ago I was as happy and as hopeful as that. Too excited and happy to stop and think and be careful.

I can be very careful now, she thought, when it doesn't matter. There is nothing to hurry for now. I've come, and on Monday I go. No need for any words between us. He said, What's the use of my wasting breath to explain?

Not for anything in the world, my darling, would I have you waste your precious breath. No need for us to quarrel. No need at all. I know when I've had enough and so do you. I saw the finish in your eyes and you must have seen it in mine. My hunch about us was wrong. All my adult life I've gone by my hunches and it's time I got over such folly.

The dress was cut very low in the back, with two narrow strips of fabric to hold it up. She had a back worth showing when it wasn't burned to a crisp or even when it was burned

to a solid color. I ought to have taken the bra off, too, she thought in disgust. I look pretty funny, red and white in strips. Not a very interesting pattern, either. Why didn't I use a fancy stencil? The flag or something. Sailors have it on them in tattoo.

She stayed in the bedroom till Gracia came up to dress. Then she said, "I'll get out of your way here. I'm through," and wondered, as she went down the stairs, whether Gracia realized the significance of that speech.

No doubt Gracia did. She had been with them in the hall. She had heard what he said and how he said it. She must know him well enough to realize that he was through. But she doesn't know me, thought Livy. She may not be aware that I'm through, too; that I'm willing to take a terrific beating, if it seems worth it, up to a certain point, eat dirt and make excuses for the person I love and do my damndest to adapt and not lose my temper. I'm not temperish. I'm like Pa. He took an awful lot from Mother, but I never heard him say anything harsh to her. He had to take it; he was married to her. But I'm not married to Ames and never will be. I don't have to take one thing more from him. Not one.

Yet in spite of herself, when she went into the living room she hoped he would be there, waiting for her, ready to put his arms around her, and waste a little of his precious breath, and make peace between them.

He wasn't there. Nobody was in the room except Florence, who lay spread out at her ease on the grand piano, her furry stomach upward, her four paws in the air. She looked excessively uncomfortable but she was sleeping soundly.

He wasn't there, of course.

Livy stood in the doorway, stricken with disappointment because he wasn't there, impatient with herself for having hoped he might be; for having hoped at all. That was why

getting over love took so everlastingly long. You kept having silly flare-ups of hope in spite of yourself. You kept hoping that a word or a smile or a handclasp could work magic and prove you wrong and make everything right. It was sad and silly. You should have stopped believing in magic when you stopped being a child.

She went over to the piano and sat down on the bench and from there she saw Rich lying on the yellow sofa, slantwise, his legs hanging off because the sofa wasn't long enough for all of him. The back of it had hidden him from where she had stood in the doorway. He sat up, a little sheepish, almost as if she had caught him weeping in secret. He didn't look as if he felt like weeping, though, only harassed.

"Don't mind me," said Livy.

"I ought to go up and get clean," he said. He was still in sweat shirt and shapeless slacks and dirty saddle shoes. "I hate to get into a stiff shirt on a night like this. I thought I'd give Serena time to get dressed before I started. She likes plenty of space to move around in when she's dressing for a party."

Livy struck a chord and the white cat leaped from the piano, spitting.

"I should have supposed that part of the fun of being married would be getting dressed together for a party, talking things over."

He rubbed a hand over his forehead.

"There's only one thing for Serena and me to talk about now, and I thought I'd wait till after the dance before I said anything."

She despised him a little, a very little, for his complete absorption in his private problem; he was as innocently egocentric as a child with a blistered heel, hobbling along with no thought beyond his personal discomfort, unaware that

close to him other people bled to death.

Not for anything would she have confided her own unhappiness to him. His interest and sympathy weren't what she wanted. But his defective eyesight was no excuse for restricted mental vision.

"You're feeling sorry for yourself, aren't you?" she struck a series of chords and some of them were discords. She found a fierce satisfaction in the atrocious sounds. "You hate the prospect of being away from your wife for a few months."

He said indignantly, "Of course I hate it. Serena and I have never been separated for even one night. It's going to be hell for us both. But you can't understand what it means. You haven't been married."

"No. I haven't been married," she said. And perhaps I never will be. "But six or seven months, a part of one year, is nothing much compared to the rest of your life."

I haven't been married, but I know what it's like to go away from somebody you've loved and lived with. I haven't forgotten the first few months of torment after I left Carl. I thought perhaps I'd made a bad mistake, that perhaps I'd never be happy again in my life. After the first few months, it wasn't so bad; it was mostly dullness and restlessness and feeling alone and lost, going places and seeing people and feeling lonely even in a crowd.

"A few months away from somebody you love, who loves you, is nothing when you know that you can go back and be welcomed. Besides, you'll have plenty to keep you busy in the next few months. You'll be slapping at jungle-bred mosquitoes and mopping sweat and taking notes on Indian customs and manners."

You're interested in a certain job. You're much better off than a woman whose major interest in life is love. I'd get

over love more quickly, maybe, if I'd ever stayed in one place long enough to equip myself for a specialized job of work. But man seems to be my only special interest, and not the science of man. I'm limited by my physiology, or something.

"Where'd you get that sunburn?"

He had come over to stand behind her.

"On the pier this morning when you were walking in the woods by your wild lone. Who plays this piano, Rich?"

"Nobody, much. Aunt Bethy used to play a lot before her fingers stiffened up with arthritis. Ames bought her this piano when they moved into the new house. I guess it pleases her to have it here even if she can't play it."

He's very kind to everyone but me, she thought. He's tender and considerate with his mother to the point of being fantastic. He's tender with Gracia. He's even scrupulous about not offending his sister, though he doesn't like her. I'm the one for whom he has no mercy, and not even justice. It isn't justice to condemn without explanation, is it?

Her fingers were searching around among the keys for a tune her mind had forgotten years ago.

"What's that?" asked Rich. "It's familiar. I haven't heard it since I was in the sixth grade, taking piano lessons."

"I guess every child who took piano lessons around that time had to learn the same pieces," she said.

We had to learn the same things at about the same age; drudgery, tears, and frustration, and then we forgot what we had learned.

"No, that's wrong," said Rich. "You keep making the same mistake over and over."

"I know it," she said. "I know it, so why do I do it?"

"It goes like this. Dum dum, de dum, de da da."

"Dumb dumb is right," she said.

He played it in the treble with one hand.

"Sit down to it," she said, moving over. "Perhaps together we can work it out. My brother and I used to play it as a duet. Hank couldn't read a note; he wouldn't take lessons; but he could pick out almost any tune by ear. We had to give up our duets, though. They gave our mother headaches."

He sat beside her. I'm twelve years old, she thought, and this is Hank beside me on the bench. I'm twelve and have nothing to worry about worse than tomorrow's arithmetic and the certainty that in a minute Mother will come downstairs and say, Children, please!

"Louder," she said, pounding. "Louder, louder. Bang it. Raise the roof."

He's as big as Hank. He has as much strength in his hands. The bigger they are, the harder they fall. Three marriages, and every one a flop. It's a cruel shame. Big and brawny and innocent and idealistic. He's no better off than I am. His physiology may be different from mine and love may not be his major interest, but until the love part of his life is satisfactorily taken care of, how can he have any peace of mind, or any real comfort, no matter how congenial his work may be?

"That's it," she said. "Bang it! Wake the dead."

I wonder if Carl can hear this over at the other house. I suppose he's dressing for the dance, and his wife is putting his studs in for him and tying his tie. A happy marriage but he looks as if he had died years ago. If he's dead, this ought to rouse him, but it won't remind him of anything, because he never took piano lessons; there wasn't money enough, and he hadn't interest enough, for extras; all he cared about, even when he was twelve, was finishing up his preliminary schooling as quickly and as well as he could in order to get

at the serious business of learning to be a surgeon. And now he takes orders for advertising folders, stationery, catalogues, high school yearbooks, Christmas cards, and what have you. It doesn't make sense.

Thump, thump, thump and jingle.

"Again," she said. "Let's start over and go through the whole thing again."

He ought to be able to hear this. The other house is only a couple of gardens and a few tall trees away from here. But even if he can hear it, up in his bedroom where he and his wife are dressing for the dance, it won't remind him of anything. We didn't have a piano in that fourth floor furnished room up under the roof. We didn't go out to dress-up parties together. He hadn't the time and he didn't own a boiled shirt. We never went to dances. We had a better time at home by ourselves.

It's going to be horrible dancing with Ames, the way things are between us. I wish I could go away from Hotchkiss now, this minute, but he said I must stay until Monday morning and so I must stay. He thinks I can't stick to anything. He'll see that I can. Before eight o'clock on Monday he'll wish he had never invited me here and told me I had to stay. I wish he hadn't invited me here. No, I don't. It's a good thing he did, because now it's settled. We might have married in haste and found out how wrong we were for each other, and a broken marriage makes a sad mess. Look at Hank. Look at Gracia. This way we can just shake hands and say good-by and have nothing much to regret.

"That was fine," said Rich. He smiled at her jubilantly. He was only a big child, she thought. Children took their troubles as hard as anybody but they were easily distracted and fairly soon comforted. He had a beautiful and loving

wife to comfort him and to come back to when his job was finished.

But what have I got? she wondered. I've lost my love. I threw over my job yesterday. I'm on the loose again. I'm twenty-eight years old; that's nearly thirty, and where am I? Nowhere, and alone.

"Do you remember this one?" he asked and struck into the opening of a military march.

Behind them Ames roared, "Stop that infernal racket!"

They dropped their hands.

"Mother's in bed," he said, "trying to get some rest. The picnic was too much for her. You'll split her head wide open."

"Sorry," said Rich.

Livy wouldn't say it. She sat perfectly still, her hands in her lap. She wouldn't look round.

"Good God," said Ames. "Livy, your back looks like raw beefsteak."

"Give me a necklace of onions," she suggested. "Smother me in mushrooms and watch the stags cut in. Some like it raw, you know, just warmed through, before the natural juices are dried up."

"A plain burn would be unsightly enough," he said, "but you're done in stripes. It's revolting. Haven't you a jacket that will cover you?"

"Get me a shawl," she said. "Get me a cap and a fall of lace and I'll go to the dance with you as Whistler's Mother."

"You'll go nowhere with me looking like that," he said.

Rich said, "Is my wife dressed yet, do you know?"

"How would I know? She's in Gracia's room, talking her head off, that's all I know," said Ames.

"I'd better go up and make myself respectable," said Rich.

He left in haste. He had enough trouble of his own, thought Livy, without standing around when Ames used that tone. In a way she was glad to have Rich out of the room. But she felt deserted, too. She pushed back the piano bench and went across to Ames. She didn't believe in magic. She warned herself that she didn't. But she had to prove to herself that nothing, not a word or a touch or a smile, not being alone together, close enough to kiss, could make anything right. She stood close enough for him to put his arms around her, in case he cared to.

"If you won't go anywhere with me because of the way I look," she said, lightly, without antagonism, appealing to him, "then let's not go anywhere. Let's not go to the dance. Let's stay here all evening by ourselves, face to face, so that you won't have to see my unsightly back."

Even the thought of it, an evening alone with him, made her begin to hope a little against her better judgment.

"Let's spend an evening by ourselves, quietly. Can't we, darling? There have been too many people around. They keep getting in our way."

It isn't very much to ask for, is it? Just one evening. One more chance to put things right between us. We accomplished a very great deal in those other two evenings we had alone together. Let us have one more. It might amount to something. We might be able to talk through to understanding. We might be able to make peace by making love.

"We have to go to the dance, Livy. Celeste is running it. She is counting on our being there."

"Then can't we just show our faces and leave? We did that at the Hallams' party. Do you remember? We met, and we talked ten minutes, and then we left. And six weeks ago when you turned up without warning and I had that dinner date, you went along in the taxi with me, do you remem-

ber, and you waited outside in the taxi while I went in and explained to my hostess that it was your only evening in town and I couldn't spend it with anyone except you? I made an enemy of her for life, but she didn't matter."

"That's all very well," he said, "but you can't afford to make enemies in a town this size where you have to live with or next door to people year in and year out. We have to go to the damned dance, Livy. I'll see if Gracia has anything that will cover your shoulders."

"You don't want to spend an evening here at home alone with me."

"We wouldn't be alone," he said. "Gracia will be here all evening. She isn't going to the dance."

She began to laugh.

"Don't look at me like that," she said, laughing. "I know it isn't funny. It's dreadful. Go on up and ask Gracia if she has a nice modish bit of sackcloth she'll lend me. Go on. Hurry."

I'm only laughing so that I won't burst out crying and make a bigger fool of myself than I am already. Besides, you think I look revolting enough as I am now, and crying would make me more so. Crying would make the rims of my eyes pink, like Gracia's. What's she got to cry about or lie awake at night about? Has she anything to repent of at leisure? Falling in love with the wrong man is plenty of reason for crying at night and repenting. But you aren't wrong for her, so why should she cry? Perhaps, when I'm gone, you'll turn to her for consolation; you turn to her in any crisis, large or small; if you have any sense, you'll marry her and let the poor patient girl have her reward for her years of being a good sister-in-law and a good daughter-in-law. So if she has any little sackcloth model on hand, she can lend it to me to cover my stripes.

He went up the stairs two at a time and knocked on Gracia's door which stood ajar. He heard Serena saying, "Her figure is fairly good except that it's too long-waisted." He knew she was talking about Livy.

"Come in," said Gracia.

Serena, in ivory satin, with a small green bow in her hair, stood at the mirror.

"How do I look?" she asked instantly.

"Lovely," he said. "What's that?" pointing to what she was holding.

"What does it look like?" she held it up against herself for him to admire, a little short-sleeved coat covered with glitter. "I found it at Dakin's sale. It's just what I've been wanting, the sort of thing I can't make myself."

"Are you wearing it tonight?"

"Of course not. I couldn't wear it over a long-sleeved dress."

"Then may I borrow it just for tonight?"

"Borrow it!"

"Yes. For Livy. She got a shocking sunburn and her dress is backless."

"Well, that's her worry, not mine," said Serena shortly.

"Be nice, Mrs. Howes."

"I don't see why I should be nice."

"Well, be nice, anyway," he wheedled, "even if you don't see why you should. Be a good sport, please."

"I don't want to be a good sport," she said. "It only means giving you your own way. I won't do it."

Gracia said, "I may have something Livy can wear."

"You may. I was going to ask you," said Ames. "But this is new, and it would fit Livy better than anything of yours, Gracia. Let me borrow the little coat, Serena, please do."

"No, I won't," she answered angrily. "I never lend my

clothes. This is new and it would be completely spoiled for me if anyone else wore it before I had a chance to, or afterward, either."

"Then I'll buy it of you," he said, all the more determined because of her resistance. "I'll give you twice what you paid for it. That's a handsome profit."

"I don't want a handsome profit. I want my own little coat," she said. "Let go of my wrist, Ames Chelsea. You're hurting me."

"It wouldn't hurt you to be a little generous. I had no idea you were such a possessive little thing. Give me the coat, Serena, please."

"No!" she cried, struggling to free herself from his hand.

"Then I'll have to take it by force," he said.

She gave a sharp cry and jerked free but she left her treasured bargain in his possession. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

"You twisted my wrist, Ames Chelsea. You're a hateful bully. You think you can do exactly what you like because Uncle's dead and Rufus is gone and you're the only man left at home. Nobody paid you any attention while Rufus was around and Uncle still living. I never did like you and I don't like that girl you invited here and nobody else in the family likes her, either, and you've spoiled the week end for all of us by having her here, Daffy nearly drowning, and Mrs. Prout getting sick, and Gracia having to cook and wash dishes and make beds and pick up after your guest. You talk about my being generous. You might have a little generosity toward Gracia. You let her wait on you and your guest as if she were the hired help."

"Oh, please be quiet," Gracia begged. "Aunt Bethy will hear you."

Serena rushed out of the room. They heard the door of

the guest room slam. They heard the stifled sound of her crying.

"All that fuss about nothing," said Ames in disgust. He gave the glittering rag in his hands a contemptuous shake as if it were a dustcloth.

"She hates to lend her things," said Gracia.

"I didn't twist her wrist. I forced her fingers open, that was all. Did you see how she looked at me out of those yellow eyes? I fully expected to have my face raked with those fancy long fingernails. She looked as Floosy does when I try to take a half-dead bird away from her."

"Ames, remember she's pretty much upset just now. She's only just found out that she's going to have a baby, and she didn't want a baby yet, and she's disappointed about the expedition and she knows how bitterly disappointed Rich must be. It's only natural she should be in a state of nerves right now."

"Don't reproach me for adding the last straw, Gracia."

"I'm not reproaching you for anything. I wouldn't think of it."

Because he was ashamed of himself, he had to justify himself to her.

"A crying fit is nothing new with Serena. You can't have forgotten the explosions there used to be while she was living at home with us."

"There haven't been any since she married Rich."

"You mean we haven't been around to see and hear them."

"I don't believe there have been any," she said. "She's wonderfully happy with Rich. The life out there at the School isn't very thrilling for her, but she never complains."

"He gives her her way about everything. He spoils her."

"No more than she spoils him. She thinks he's perfect, you know she does. Everything he does and thinks and wants

is exactly right with her."

"Don't stand up for her, Gracia. It makes me feel all the more guilty."

She smiled.

"I must put dinner on the table."

He moved along with her, their arms linked.

"Is Mother coming down?"

"No. I'll bring up a tray for her."

"Let me do it."

"Seeing you will only start her off again, Ames. She feels terrible about her outburst this afternoon. She wishes she hadn't said anything."

His spirits had been low enough before. Now they touched rock bottom.

"Tell her she can stop being remorseful, Gracia," he said.

"If that's how she felt about Livy, it's just as well she spoke out. I was a fool to hope they could ever get on together."

He sighed.

"I wish to God tonight and tomorrow and tomorrow night were over and done with," he said. "I wish it were Monday morning now, this minute."

14

WATCHING the clock didn't make the time move faster, of course, but at least, thought Livy, it proved that the time did move. She missed her wrist watch. From where she sat at the dinner table, opposite Rich, she couldn't see the face of his watch or that of Ames', and she wouldn't ask the time. But once when Rich and Ames were changing the plates, the kitchen door swung open far enough for her to see the clock that hung on the kitchen wall. Seven-thirty, almost.

She talked to Gracia, mostly, and so did Ames. Rich said little. There were only the four of them at table. At breakfast there had been the four of them.

"Serena isn't hungry," Gracia explained.

"Well, it can't be morning sickness at this hour," said Livy flippantly. "It must be evening sickness."

It's what I've got, she thought. It doesn't affect the stomach. Only the mind. Nothing ever seems to affect my stomach. I can't taste anything but I can go on eating just as usual, and I'm hungrier than usual, if anything. Emotion is supposed to interfere with the appetite but it has no effect on mine, and nothing keeps me awake at night, either. I must be a pretty tough specimen. I'm not the stuff that tragedy is made of. Dear me, no. I'd never cut my throat for love. Too messy. I'd never waste away in what used to be called a decline but what was probably pernicious anemia caused by

skipped meals and not by blighted love.

Seven-thirty. Now let me see. That makes thirty-six and a half more hours to be lived through.

Ames said, "I'll help you do the dishes, Gracia."

"Can't we all help, Gracia?"

"No," said Gracia. "Thanks, but you might get something on your dress."

In the living room Rich turned on the radio. That gave the time at regular intervals and helped to pass the time. Eight. Eight-fifteen. Eight-thirty. What were they talking about out there in the kitchen? They were taking a long time to wash a few plates and cups.

Eight-forty-five. Nine. Serena swished into the room in full-skirted long-sleeved ivory satin that was cut to her waist in back and nearly as low in front. Her slippers were green and there was a green bow in her hair in place of the orchid that Daffy had eaten.

"Thank you for lending me your little coat, Serena."

The shallow light brown eyes went over Livy and through her. Pete's sake, thought Livy, squirming, she can see right through to the safety pin that is holding my busted shoulder strap together.

"Rich darling, why don't we start?"

Why, she isn't going to answer me, thought Livy. She was friendly before. Have I made another enemy?

"Honey, you look wonderful," said Rich.

Serena sat on the arm of his chair, facing the radio, and slid her arm about his neck. Her back, turned to Livy, was beautifully smooth. Her vertebrae and shoulder blades didn't stick out the way most girls' did.

"Livy, isn't she beautiful?" said Rich. "Not only beautiful but the best sport in the world. There's nobody like her."

Ames came in.

"Let's go. The sooner we go the sooner we can leave. You won't think much of the orchestra, Livy. It's local talent. We'll leave on the tick of midnight."

"I shan't," said Serena, but she said it to her husband, not to Ames. "We'll stay till the very last dance, won't we, darling? We don't often have a chance to dance together."

"We'll stay as long as you like," he promised.

In the hall Gracia waved them away.

"Have a good time," she said.

Have a good time. Pa used to say that when Hank and I were little and went to parties together. But Mother used to say, Do try to keep your clothes tidy and don't eat more than two pieces of cake. Then when we were older and Hank took girls who weren't his sisters and I went out with boys, Pa said the same thing to us, Have a good time, and Mother said, Come home by eleven.

At one end of the Women's Club auditorium hung an electric clock. That's a help, thought Livy. Now I can watch the time and help it to pass, and I needn't consult anyone's watch. Nine-thirty. That means thirty-four and a half hours more, and at least sixteen of those, two nights, I can spend in sleep.

It was curious and sad to be dancing with Ames for the first time and to have it an ordeal to be endured, to have him hold her impersonally as if he had met her just before the music started and hadn't liked her much, as if this were a duty dance, as if Celeste had dragged him over and said, You must dance with this girl; she's new in town, and you've got to be decent to her, and I'll tell Mother on you if you don't behave.

"It's much like Littlefield dancing school, Ames. I used to wear a starched white dress and black patent leather slip-

pers. Did you go to dancing school when you were little?"

"Yes," he said. "I was obliged to."

"Some of the boys," she said, "had to be bullied into dancing with us, even when they liked us. That surly reluctance was supposed to be manly."

I shall talk, she decided, whether he likes it or not. It will help me to forget what I thought dancing with him would be like, and how different this is. It will help to fill the time and make it pass. Lovers don't talk when they dance, but we aren't lovers any more, so I'll talk.

"The auditorium was much like this, too, just as bare. We had a lesson every Friday, after school, and at the end of the year, about this time, we had a real party and wore our best dresses and had the high school orchestra instead of just Mrs. Butts at the piano. Is this a high school orchestra? It's better than anything we had in Littlefield. That fat boy conducting is quite like a professional, though I'm afraid his mess jacket may burst at the seams."

Not so long ago, yesterday afternoon, when I was on the train coming to you, I was so happy that I thought the glory inside me would burst through my skin and through the seams of my suit and maybe send the whole train off the track. How long ago was it that I was happy? Yesterday afternoon at a quarter of four. Thirty hours ago. Just thirty hours. I do like a good round number. Thirty hours ago I was madly happy and madly in love. And now I'm in love and that's all. What became of the happiness and the lovely madness? I must have pushed them into the lake with Daffy. They never came up. They must be lying there now, under the water, quiet and drowned in the weedy mud.

"There's your sister in dark brown lace. I'm sure it's the very best quality of lace. She dances well."

"She does everything well," said Ames.

"And Carl dances well, too. He has grace."

"Who has?"

She swallowed.

"Your brother-in-law. Celeste's husband. Charles Brittain. Have you ever noticed something odd about the bony structure of his face?"

"No, I haven't."

"If you look at his face with your eyes almost shut, it turns into a death's head. His forehead is so broad and high, his eye sockets so deep, his nose so blunt, his mouth so thin and wide. There are deep shadows under his cheekbones, and his skin has no color at all. Yet he's not unattractive. He doesn't look as if he enjoyed dancing, and yet he's doing it with astonishing grace. Death taking a holiday and making merry. Did you happen to see that play? I saw a revival of it at a summer theater. All I remember is the face of Death, and the leaves falling, though it wasn't autumn."

She must stop. She musn't go on about Carl. And she musn't call him Carl.

"There go the Howes in a blissful dream. It's charming to see two people so deeply completely in love after three years of marriage."

"She's a possessive little beast," said Ames.

"Is she?" asked Livy.

"She made an infernal row about lending you the jacket."

"So that's why she hasn't spoken to me since. Or to you, either. Coming over here in the car she talked only to Rich, did you notice?"

And I have another enemy in the family. That makes it just about unanimous. All of them hostile to me except Rich and he's only an in-law. All of them hostile; Serena, because of a handful of sequins; Mrs. Chelsea, because I'm in love with her son; Celeste, because I disciplined Daffy; Gracia,

because she's in love with Ames herself; and Carl, because I knew him once upon a time. They'll all be glad to see me leave on Monday.

"You know," said Ames, "the way Serena acted about the jacket set me thinking. I'm inclined to think that it wasn't loyalty to her dead mother that made her so bitter against Uncle Rufe for remarrying. She cared much more about Uncle Rufe than she ever did about her mother. I know that for a fact. She was an only child and a daughter and he spoiled her and she thought he belonged to her entirely. I believe it was sharing him with a stranger that she couldn't take."

"I hope," said Livy, "that she isn't too possessive to let Rich go off on the expedition without her."

"The question will never arise. He won't go."

"He's thinking about it."

"Then you put it into his head."

She changed the subject quickly, "There seem to be only couples here tonight. No stags. No women without men."

"Celeste disapproves of the cutting system," he said. "There won't be anything tonight but exchanges."

"So that's why Gracia is sitting at home with a book? Why didn't you scare up a man for her?"

"She said she didn't care about coming."

I suppose, she thought, if I hadn't come for the week end, you'd have brought her to the dance. You'd be dancing with her now and liking it very much better than you seem to like dancing with me.

Baiting him, she said, "Gracia is too young and attractive to spend her evenings with a book and her days companioning an elderly woman. She ought to have remarried after the divorce. I asked her why she hadn't."

He was horrified.

"Livvy, that was outrageous of you."

"Would you like to know her reply?"

"No!" he said with violence.

"Yes, you would. She said she hadn't remarried because nobody had asked her. Is there a shortage of eligible males in Hotchkiss?"

The music stopped.

Now he will find another partner for me, she thought. He will suggest an exchange. He will rid himself of me.

He did nothing of the sort.

Well, I'm not going to suggest a change of partners, she told herself grimly. He knows what to do when he's stuck with a girl. He could rid himself of me with the greatest of ease. Why doesn't he?

The music blared.

He put a cautious arm around her.

"Do you have to hold me so far off?" she asked. "Are you afraid of catching something from me?"

"I didn't want to hurt you," he said stiffly.

Oh, don't you! she thought. Yet ever since we left the lake this afternoon you have held me far off from you. You have shut yourself into yourself, away from me. Perhaps you're afraid that if you hold me closely, you will remember that you love me. Because you do. And I love you. We'll get over it, of course, but not in a hurry. It will take time.

"Your back must be very sensitive," he said. "A burn like that."

"Oh, my back!" she said, enlightened. "Oh no, it isn't my back that's sensitive. My skin is wonderfully thick. The burn isn't deep. It looks worse than it feels."

His arm tightened a little. He held her closer, but not as if he really liked having her close.

She watched the clock. She kept on watching it. Ten-

fifteen. Ten-thirty. That makes only thirty-three and a half hours more. Thirty-three and a half hours from now he'll shake hands with me, as if I were just any departing guest. He'll say good-by, and it really will be good-by.

She shut her eyes to keep from seeing his face so near her own. She tried to imagine him a stranger. But he was still Ames whom she loved. And he loved her. He had rejected her, but he loved her.

He'll get over it before I do, she thought. He'll have Gracia to help him. But I won't have anyone. I'll be alone.

I'd rather be alone my whole life than live with a man who treated me as if I were on trial for my life, who used against me every word I uttered and every move I made, who condemned me without a trial.

"I suppose," she said, tormented beyond endurance and speaking loudly to be heard above the strident music, "that its being part of the town water supply made my crime just that much worse."

The last of the sentence rang out in sudden silence. The dance was over. Celeste and her husband were close by, within touching distance, Celeste in her dark brown lace that hung like a sack, with a garnet butterfly pinned to her flat brown braid. She put a hand on Livy's arm.

"My dear, I want to thank you for acting so quickly at the lake this afternoon, pushing Daffy in after she pushed Phyllis. I didn't see what had happened but Charles did and explained to me after we got home. I was glad to have the situation made clear to me because it did seem petty for you to have pushed Daffy into the water simply because she kept saying she didn't like you."

"Oh, drop it, can't you?" said Ames wearily.

"Why should I?" his sister asked. "I'm pleased to find out that Livy has the same ideas about discipline that I have, im-

mediate retribution dealt out without show of anger. You'll make an excellent mother, Livy. Don't you agree that spanking is worse than useless? It makes a child feel that the adult is taking vengeance, using superior force. And threats are silly, and saying 'Don't' simply puts ideas in a child's head. The only allowable punishment, it seems to me, is proving to a child that she will be done by as she does."

Livy said, "Ames, I could use a cigarette."

Celeste said instantly, with authority, "You will have to go outside if you smoke. The hall is so crowded that the air will soon be unfit to breathe even without smoke. We'll drive everyone outside during intermission and try to air out. Isn't it splendid that we sold so many tickets? We've cleared forty dollars. My committee wanted to decorate the hall and serve punch but I vetoed that. All that's required for a benefit dance is a floor and music. We got the orchestra for nothing. Lars' mother is on my committee. He's good, isn't he? Quite a musical genius. Even in grammar school he had a tiny swing band of his own."

I have never met anyone I disliked so intensely, thought Livy. How could he marry her? How could he? How could he love her after me?

"I want you to look at this butterfly in my hair," said Celeste. "I inherited it from Dad's grandmother. Isn't it charming? And quite valuable because of its age and setting, although garnets have no great value in themselves."

"My earrings," said Livy, "are an interesting specimen of early American glass, Woolworth design. How do you like them?"

Celeste laughed.

I hate her, thought Livy in despair. When I throw a rock it disappears into her complacency without even a ripple, much less a splash.

"Ames," said his sister, "let's exchange the next dance. Livy will enjoy dancing with Charles. He dances infinitely better than you do and he's tall enough for her. She must be hard for you to lead. You do better with small girls like Gracia and me."

Oh no, oh, please no, Livy prayed. Ames, save me, spare me, please say no, please, please!

"Just as you like," said Ames stiffly.

He would not save her. Why should he? He didn't know there was anything to save her from. And Carl said nothing.

The music was a roaring in her ears. It ought to be *The Funeral March of a Marionette*. All about her couples were dancing. Ames and Celeste were dancing. She was left alone with Carl in the midst of a crowd. She was as much alone with him as she had ever been in that fourth floor room up under the roof, that room with the view of the river and the city beyond. At night the neon signs were beautiful beyond the black water and the headlights of the cars moving along the river boulevard were jewels sliding along an invisible thread.

It was unthinkable that she should move into the circle of his arms.

"Carl," she said. "Carl. Couldn't we sit this out? Or stand it?"

Since we have to stand it.

"Couldn't we walk?"

The dark veranda was crowded. Couples stood about on the dark lawn.

"What time is it, Carl?"

"Ten of eleven."

"In thirty-three hours and ten minutes I shall be gone and you'll never have to see me again or think of me."

The street was dark and cool. The trees met overhead.

There were no stars, no neon signs, no sliding jewels, no summer wind that smelt of asphalt and gasoline fumes.

"Can I count on that?" he asked.

"You can count on it, Carl."

At the corner was a street lamp with insects circling it and thudding against it.

"Livy," he said, and halted, "let me look at your face."

She lifted her face to the light.

"Have I changed very much, Carl?"

After a moment he said in a low voice, "Very little," and they walked on together.

He had acknowledged her at last. She was relieved and grateful. After the strain and heartsickness of the early evening, Ames' aloofness, his rejection of her, her feeling of being an unwanted guest, she was almost at peace. Now that Carl had acknowledged her, she was closer to him than she had been to Ames since the afternoon.

"Why did you pretend not to know me? Even when we were by ourselves, with no one to overhear and question, you said we had never been friends. Why did you? How could you?"

"Because it's true, Livy. We were lovers but never friends."

"It isn't true, and it was a cruel thing to say to me."

"It hurt you?"

"Of course it hurt me."

"I'm glad," he said. "It's time you were hurt. You have dealt out cruelty to others in your time."

"No!" she said. "No, Carl, never on purpose. I never injured anyone on purpose. What did I ever do to you that was cruel?"

They were closer together, even if he hated her, than she had ever been to Ames. There were things they both remem-

bered that no one else had ever known about. The closeness gave her a kind of comfort, mixed as it was with trouble and sorrow. They were walking together away from the present, away from Ames and Celeste. The years were vanishing into the darkness. Because of the darkness she couldn't see the changes that eight years had marked on his face, and his voice was wholly familiar, gentle, disdainful. He had affected irony and indifference, she remembered, with most people. But with her he had never been supercilious, never bored. They had loved each other.

"Carl, do you mean it was cruel the way I left you without explanation and without warning?"

Yes, that was cruel. She knew now. To cut off an intimate relationship without warning or explanation. Ames had done that to her in the afternoon. He had rejected her as definitely as if he had left the house without a word and failed to return to her.

"Carl, I had to do what I did. Making a clean break seemed the only way to make a break at all. I thought you would get over me quickly. You were more in love with your job than you were with me, more absorbed in it than you could ever have been in any girl. You used to talk lightly about love, don't you remember? As if it were nothing but a prick of the flesh? You didn't talk about it that way when we were alone together, but you were very flippant with those friends of yours that you used to bring home occasionally for beer and talk. Those bright hard-boiled young men who thought that medicine was the most important thing on earth, that God had laid his hand on each and every one of them. They used to talk about women, and so did you, as if we were nothing but a collection of viscera, of interest only in bed or on the operating table, to study and practice upon, to sleep with, if healthy, to cut open and cure, if

diseased."

She was walking rapidly and he had to quicken his pace to keep up with her. His shoulder brushed hers. He said, "Livy, Livy, I never knew you minded the way we talked. You were just like one of us."

"No, I wasn't," she said. "How could I be? I was younger than any of you, I wasn't a medical student, I wasn't a bright hard-boiled young man, I was a girl very deeply in love and very mixed up in my own mind as to what I wanted. That's what I was trying to explain to you this afternoon at the lake, that at twenty I was mixed up in my mind, and inexperienced, and very clumsy. I was trying to tell you that if I had injured you in any way, it was an accident, and I'm deeply sorry for it."

"I thought you were trying to tell me something," he said. "I knew you weren't merely reminiscing. But Livy, Livy, you knew I was in love with you that winter and summer, you knew it, no matter what I said when other people were with us. You knew I wanted to marry you and live with you forever."

"But we couldn't have married for years," she said, "and I wasn't sure that I wanted to marry anyone, even you, and live with one man forever. And I realized, finally, that we couldn't go on as we were. Secrecy makes a relationship all wrong, somehow, as if it's something you're ashamed of. If you're not ashamed of it at first, you become so after a while."

"My friends all knew. To them it was the same as a marriage."

"Not quite," she said, and was surprised to find how angry she could be about it, all this long time after. "And my family didn't know about it. It was when I realized that I couldn't bear to have them know, that I left you. Carl, is

206

that why you hate me now? Because I made the break before you could? I know it's usually the man who tires first and gets restive and breaks off."

"You left me because you were tired of me," he said, "but you might at least have had the decency to tell me so. I wouldn't have tried to keep you. You might at least have said good-by."

She stopped where she was.

"You're not to think I left you because I was tired of you. I never supposed you could think that. Carl, I was terribly in love with you when I left you; that's why I didn't wait to say good-by to you; I was afraid if I saw you again I wouldn't be able to leave you. It took me four years to get over loving you. Four years is a long time, Carl, when you're in your twenties. I began to be afraid I never would get over you, but then I met somebody and by that time I knew what I wanted. I wanted marriage, and he wanted it, too, but he had a wife already, and I'm not getting mixed up in any divorces; so I left in a hurry and hoped I'd get over it in a hurry. But I guess I'm pretty single-minded, or just plain faithful. I fall in love quickly but I don't get out that way. If it's any comfort to you to know that I've had my share of loneliness and wretchedness in the past eight years, Carl, know it, and don't hate me."

"Livy, Livy," he said, "what made you leave me? What happened? Something must have. What was it?"

She walked on.

"Oh, what's the good of talking about it now? It's nothing. I suppose it was nothing of any real consequence at the time, but it seemed terrible to me, not only because I was young and mixed up in my mind, but because, I suppose, inside, I was on the defensive about you and me. I'd grown up in Littlefield, remember, a town like Hotchkiss, where pub-

lic opinion makes the rules and there's usually a pretty sound reason for the rules that are made."

"What happened, Livy?"

"Don't make me tell you. It can only sound silly now. But it humiliated me intolerably. If such a thing happened to me now I'd know how to pass it off with a wisecrack, I suppose. Only now I'd know enough to keep out of situations where I could be exposed to that sort of humiliation."

A few years passing made all the difference, she thought, in what was humiliating. What seemed intolerable at a certain age could be passed over lightly a few years later; the same thing or a similar thing could happen a few years later and could be ignored, or accepted and endured, without its leaving any permanent mark.

"When I was thirteen," she said, remembering aloud, "I lost my bloomers on the main street of town; a button came off; Mother insisted on buttons instead of elastic. I was a tall child, looking more than my age, but still a child, and my bloomers came down around my feet and tripped me up, and a lot of people looked at me and laughed. The men laughed in a particular way, and it shamed and enraged me, because all those people had seen underwear before; they all wore it, supposedly; so what was funny about it? It was a terrible experience. I thought I was disgraced for life. If it had happened when I was twenty, I would have been annoyed but I wouldn't have felt disgraced, naturally. Only, of course," she laughed a little, "it couldn't have happened to me when I was twenty because by that time I had given up buttons. Nobody wore buttons underneath any more, and a good thing, too."

"Livy," he said, sounding strangled, "are you going to tell me what happened or aren't you?"

"Oh," she said, "I had a little skirmish with one of those

friends of yours, one of those bright young men. It wouldn't have happened if I had been married to you. I mean, it wouldn't have happened in the way it did. Passes are made at wives, to be sure, but finesse is required, or a pretense of personal interest, or at least some encouragement on the part of the wife. But he was perfectly casual and cold-blooded about it, confident that neither you nor I would object in the least; he treated me as if I were in the business. I lost my temper; I haven't done that more than two or three times in my life. I hit him. It wasn't a good idea. I hit him in the nose. I'd learned on Hank. It's all right, I guess, with brothers or amorous drunks. But this one wasn't drunk. I ought to have stuck to language. That's what he did. He certainly told me off. I didn't have to throw him out. He left quite willingly, after he'd said his say. He left me feeling as if I really were the abominable things he had called me."

"Why didn't you tell me? I had a right to know," his voice was tight with rage. Was it rage at her or for her? She didn't know. She hardly cared. She was suddenly tired to death and disgusted. It was a mistake to rake up old trouble.

"People who aren't married don't have any rights over each other, Carl."

"You should have told me. I would have killed him."

"Would you? I hoped you'd feel that way. Only I couldn't be sure you would, do you see? And if you hadn't, if you had laughed at me for my squeamishness, I'd have had to kill you. Well, no, I wouldn't have, of course, but whichever way you felt, whatever you did or whatever I did, there would have been more trouble, and people would have found out about it. My little Pa might have found out about it. Think what Mother would have said to him. The good old tune of 'I told you so' sung with variations. He took a long chance when he staked me to a year of freedom and

sent me off on my own."

"Livy."

"Yes?"

"Who was it?"

Then she knew he was angry for her, not with her, and it comforted her that he could be angry so long after. If he could be as angry as he sounded, all these years afterward, on her behalf, then he couldn't hate her. She was thankful, because it was dreadful to be hated for years by someone who once had loved you very much.

"It doesn't matter who, Carl. He was nothing but a straw in the wind. You wouldn't think a straw could hurt your self-respect much, would you? But it can if it shows which way public opinion is blowing. Carl, do you realize that when I saw you last you were on your way here? You were coming to Padua because that old lady, your cousin or your mother's cousin or something, had had a stroke. Yesterday, in the train coming to Hotchkiss, I tried to remember the name of your village. I knew it was somewhere around here, near the state line. I even looked for it on a map, but the map I had showed only the principal cities and towns. Ames says his mother was born in Padua. Did she know the cousin you lived with when you were little?"

"The Chelseas know nothing about me," he said, and his voice was remote and disdainful again. "Cigarette, Livy?"

She was glad to be matter-of-fact again. She took a cigarette from the case he held out and let him light it. He held the lighter in his left hand. He said, "Look at this," and the tiny flame illumined his other hand. She looked, and cried out. It was only a part of a hand. The tiny flame went out and he put the lighter back in his pocket.

"Gangrene," he said. "The tiniest nick and I was finished. I don't know why they bothered to save the rest of me. A

surgeon's no good with only a hand and a half."

"And you gave it all up because of that?" she cried wildly. "All your hopes and your years of planning, all your training, the whole profession? But surgery's only a part."

"The only part I cared about," he said coldly. "We must go back. Celeste will be wondering what has become of us."

She was horribly shaken. She kept seeing again and again, in the dark, that illumined misshapen hand that wasn't a hand. The realization of what it had done to his life, what he had allowed it to do to him, filled her with horror and protest.

Other couples were strolling. There was no music. It must be the intermission. The wide veranda was crowded. She didn't want to go in to Ames. She must get control of herself first. At the edge of the lawn she faltered.

"Carl, go in without me."

"Livy," he said in a whisper, "Livy, why didn't you stick to me? Why weren't you with me? You might have been able to put the pieces together again, what was left of me."

The reproach was intolerable.

"Is that you, Livy?" asked Rich from the lawn. "Serena's gone off to find a needle and thread and I'm about to find myself a drink. I don't want to drink alone. Come with me."

"Oh, yes!" she said. "Yes, I will. Carl, tell Ames where I've gone, will you? Tell him that Rich and I will be back in a couple of minutes."

Not that he'll care, she thought, whether I ever come back.

15

H_E did care.

He wanted to go after her and bring her back. He couldn't do that, of course. He had to pretend indifference, and wait.

The minutes were passing and Monday morning was coming nearer with every minute, and after Monday he wouldn't see her again. He wanted to make the most of the little time that was left. Having made up his mind about her, he had no anger, but only a sense of finality and loss. It was no satisfaction being with her; she was crackling with antagonism toward him, giving off sparks that burned him, and instead of being roused to combativeness, he could only accept the discomfort. She was behaving badly, twitting him, tormenting him, doing her best to infuriate him, and he knew why and couldn't blame her; he had treated her badly; they were equally miserable and there was nothing that either of them could do about it. Having her in his arms, dancing with her, was painful; a travesty of intimacy. Yet while she was out of his sight, his sense of loss was as final as if already she had gone away for good, and he stood in the doorway, watching the street, straining his ears for the sound of her voice and her laughter.

The intermission ended. A popular waltz emptied the lawn and the veranda. Serena came up behind him.

"Where's Rich? He was supposed to meet me here. Have you seen him, Ames? Have you any idea where he's gone?"

She hated having to ask him. He could tell that from her manner. She hadn't forgotten her resentment, by any means. But the need to locate Rich, when he was out of her sight, was stronger than any other drive.

The perfect wife, thought Ames. The perfect pest. What does she have to fret about? She can always be sure that eventually he'll come back to her.

Her devotion had at times seemed to him attractive. Now it seemed idiotic.

"Yes, I know where he's gone. He's gone pub-crawling."

He knew it would make her wild. He meant it to.

"Ames, what do you mean? He wouldn't! Not in this town! He'd be seen by people who have sons at the School. There are Upham parents at this dance. It would get back to Pop Upham in no time, and Pop is a perfect fiend about faculty drinking. Ames, what did Rich say? Where did he say he was going?"

"He didn't say anything to me," said Ames. "I didn't see him but I had a message by Charles that your husband was taking Livy to find a drink. You'd better consult Charles if you want further details."

"Livy!" she burst out. "Livy? Wasn't she with you?"

"She was not. I've been stuck with Celeste for two dances."

She clutched his sleeve.

"Do you mean that she spent all that time walking around in the dark with Charles Brittain and then she dragged Rich off to a public bar? Ames, you're responsible for her. You asked her here for the week end. You brought her to this dance. Why can't you keep her from bothering other women's husbands?"

He was glad to find anger rising in him again, anger at a woman who was different from Livy. He was through with Livy; he couldn't be angry with her any more; it wasn't necessary to be critical of her, even; but he could rage at all other women if he chose, given the slightest provocation or none at all. He knew exactly how to madden Serena; growing up with her, teasing her, had taught him the quickest way to get the worst results. He shouldn't do it, of course. Gracia had rebuked him for making Serena cry earlier in the evening. But Gracia was too tolerant. There was ice in her blood stream. She was different from Livy.

"I'm not your husband's keeper, Mrs. Howes. Why don't you look after him yourself?"

She was getting shrill, "I had to mend my dress. A seam gave way and I had to find the maid and take my dress off and mend it."

"If you will wear your dresses so tight that they split," he jeered, "you must expect Rich to console himself while you're taking time out for repairs."

"It isn't too tight!" she was twisting her silver kid bag in such a way that it was going to need repairs, too, in a minute. Her eyes were frantic, her pretty face distorted. "Hand stitching won't hold, that's all. If I had a sewing machine, this wouldn't have happened."

He began to laugh. She hated being laughed at. Anyone did.

"What irony, Mrs. Howes. Because you lack a sewing machine, your husband may lack a job."

Gracia would scold him for this. He didn't care what Gracia thought. He didn't care if Serena became hysterical and made a public scene. All women were his natural enemies; except Livy. His life was crowded with women that he hadn't chosen and didn't want, and because of them he

was losing the only one he wanted to keep for himself.

"It isn't funny, Ames Chelsea! You know Rich can't drink. He never drinks even in private, he has to keep in training, and even brandy pudding sauce turns him purple. Everybody will notice him, he's so big, and with that girl he'll be twice as conspicuous, everybody's been staring at her all evening, they always notice anyone you take out, and in my little jacket, too!"

"Your little jacket, Mrs. Howes, is coming up the street."

She caught up her long satin skirt in both hands and ran down the steps.

"Rich, where have you been?"

"Drowning my troubles, honey," he answered cheerfully, "and getting myself a little Dutch courage."

She gave a kind of yelp and flung herself on his neck.

Ames heard Livy say, aghast, "Pete's sake."

When he reached them, Serena was howling.

"Let's get out of here," he said. "Bring her to the car, Rich."

He was grateful for Livy's silence on the short way home. In the Chelsea living room, when Gracia looked up from her book and asked, smiling, "Did you have a good time?" he wanted to laugh again, madly, but Livy's white face stopped him. She went past Gracia to the fireplace and stood with her back to the hearthful of ashes, facing the room and the people in it, her elbows braced against the low white mantel. There was no color in her face except the blackness of her eyes and the bright red lipstick on her unsmiling mouth. She must have put on the lipstick recently and heedlessly; it was smeared a very little at one side of her full soft lower lip.

"Livy," he said, and started toward her, but Gracia was in the way. He wanted to say, "Livy, I'm sorry," but she wasn't looking at him or listening to him. She was looking at

Serena and listening to her.

"Rich, you'll be fired!" Serena was clinging to Rich and sobbing. "You may never be able to get another job. Pop won't recommend you."

"Now, honey, don't fret," he said soothingly. "I won't wait to be fired. I'll resign, that's what I'll do, and go on the expedition with Uncle Jake. That's what I've been wanting to tell you; that's what I needed extra courage for. It's going to be hell to leave you, but I've got to do it if I don't want to be a games master all my life; and you'll be safe here with Aunt Bethy, and there's enough in the savings account to take care of you, what we saved to pay your way on the expedition, our crisis fund, and this is a crisis all right."

She stepped back from him, her sleek head flung back.

"Are you out of your mind?" she asked.

He hesitated. He said uncertainly, "Of course I won't go if you'd rather I didn't leave you just at this time, honey."

"Leave me?" she cried. "You certainly aren't going to leave me now or any other time! Did you actually think you could go off to that horrible place with that nasty old man and leave me here stuck with a baby?"

His mouth fell open but no words came out.

"You're certainly not going!" she said again. "What do you think I started this baby for?"

Ames heard her but he was looking at Livy and he knew from the sudden outrage in her face that he had heard correctly. She muttered something under her breath and turned about to face the blank wall, her arms folded on the mantel, her back to the room. He knew why. But he had to make sure that what Serena had said meant what he was afraid it meant. He couldn't bear to look at Rich, but he looked at Serena.

She didn't seem aware that she had given anything away.

She put up her hands to smooth her perfectly smooth yellow hair. She opened her silver kid bag and brought out a lace handkerchief.

"What nasty old man?" asked Rich. "Do you by any chance mean Uncle Jake?"

His face was claret-colored, his voice a little thick. Anyone who didn't know him well might imagine him to be drunk. But of course Serena knew him better than anyone. She must know that he was sober enough to understand what she had said to him. But she showed no sign of guilt or perturbation. She was busy dabbing at her eyes with her wisp of lace.

"So that's what you think of Uncle Jake," said Rich. "That's what you've thought all the time about the expedition, that it was just a trip to a horrible place. Why didn't you tell me how you felt about it?"

"I didn't want to be hateful," she said. "I kept hoping that nothing would come of it. I thought your uncle might die, or else that you'd just outgrow the whole crazy idea."

"So you thought it was just a crazy idea? You've thought that all along ever since we were first engaged and you let me talk and talk about it, pretending to be interested?"

"I didn't mind your talking about it," she said, "so long as it was just talk and nothing worse. I kept hoping you'd forget about it and settle down and just be happy. We've been wonderfully happy, haven't we? The Upham job is just right for us, so near home, and no housekeeping to do, and I was more than willing to postpone having a baby until we were older. Heaven knows we can't afford a baby now, and it's no fun for me to look hideous and move into one of those horrid little houses in faculty row and do my own work, but I'd put up with anything to make you settle down and be sensible. I don't see why men have to be so restless

and impractical, wanting to give up comfort and safety and go off to explore the South Pole or be a war correspondent or join the foreign legion, just silly and dangerous. Why can't men be sensible like women and stay at home and enjoy what they have?"

"You started this baby," said Ames, "on purpose to keep Rich from going on the expedition."

"Yes, I did," she answered defiantly, "and I guess that proves how much I love him. It was the one sure way I could think of to keep him from doing anything crazy. With a family to support, he'll just have to be sensible."

"Then you knew about the expedition before he did," said Ames. "You knew about it at least two months ago."

For the first time she looked uncomfortable, a little guilty.

Rich said, "The letter from Uncle Jake wasn't lost in the mails."

"No, it wasn't!" she said. "I had to find out what was in it. I had to, for both our sakes. I hated opening it, darling. I hated burning it without saying anything to you. But I had to have time to think of a way to protect us. I only did it because I love you so much."

"The rottenest trick a woman could play on a man," said Ames savagely, "and I don't mean burning the letter. Serena, you're a sneak and a liar and a cheat. If all women were like you, and thank God they aren't, it would be a good thing to slaughter you all and let the race perish."

"Don't you speak to me like that, Ames Chelsea!" she cried. "You keep out of this. I had to protect our marriage and our life together. It's my life, too, isn't it?"

Rich was moving toward the door, stumbling a little.

"Rich, where are you going?" she turned in fright. "Rich, come back! It's the middle of the night! Ames, make him come back!"

The front door closed quietly. She made a rush, but Ames caught her wrist and held her.

"Let him go, Serena. You've done enough to him. If you have any sense, and you do have plenty of the self-preservation sort, you'll let him alone for a while. If I were he, I'd beat it and never come back. But he'll come, I'm afraid. He's a good sort of guy, and patient. He can take a lot of punishment."

She crumpled, whimpering.

"Gracia," he said, "can you get her to bed? Give her something to shut her up or the rest of us won't get any sleep tonight. Give her something to make her sleep for a couple of days."

Gracia nodded. She put an arm around Serena and urged her toward the stairs. He could always count on Gracia in a crisis. What he wanted most of her at the moment was to see the last of her and of Serena. There were things he must say to Livy that couldn't be said with other people around. There were things to be settled between them that concerned themselves and nobody else in the family, in the town, in the world.

"They've gone, Livy."

But she didn't turn round. She kept her back to the room and to him, leaning with her folded arms on the mantel. The wall above the mantel had no picture, no mirror, no ornament. She was looking at nothing but blank wall, a strip of pale blue paper spattered with tiny silver stars.

"I wonder if Rich is seeing stars," she said. "You're supposed to see them after you've been hit on the head. The poor guy. He thought she was a good sport. He said there was nobody like her. I wish she'd stop crying. It's a terrible sound, isn't it? She's cried a lot this week end, hasn't she? Her tear ducts must be built like the widow's cruse."

She raised her voice a little as if to drown out the sound of muffled weeping that came from overhead, "Do you realize, Ames, that apart from a minor qualm about reading and burning the letter, she feels entirely justified in what she did? She wouldn't have given herself away tonight, even in all her excitement, if she thought she had done anything actually contemptible or crooked. She's kept Rich fooled during three years of marriage. That's pretty good going. I couldn't have kept my trap shut that long."

"If Rich hadn't suggested going off without her," said Ames, "he never would have found out how she felt about the expedition. He might have stayed fooled all his life. And he wouldn't have thought of going off without her, I'm perfectly certain, if you hadn't given him the idea and egged him on."

He was giving her credit, a kind of oblique congratulation, but she swung round, not angry but full of bitter resistance.

"My God," she said, "so you're going to pin this on me, too. Well, maybe I did meddle in what wasn't my business, and no doubt the poor guy would be happier at this moment if he'd never found out what sort of sport he's married to, but if I were he, I'd rather know what I'm up against. I'd rather know where I stood so that I could act accordingly."

She brushed an arm across her face as if the air were full of cobwebs.

"I'd rather know and I do know," she said. "What time is it, Ames?"

Surprised, he glanced at his watch.

"A few minutes to twelve."

I'll wait till midnight, she thought, before I go up. Maybe by then she'll have stopped crying.

Something very final about the stroke of twelve, she thought, though there won't be a clock to strike except in

my mind. I ought to be standing on a bridge somewhere, but I never did hang around bridges at midnight or any other time. I always walked away from them, fast, and where did it get me? Nowhere. Back where I started. I've walked in a circle, all around the continent, and I've come right back to my unburned bridge. Padua, 17 mi. I never went there. I never knew him when he was a little boy performing a tonsillectomy with a kitchen knife on a neighbor child's rag doll. He must have been a tremendously grave little boy, never very playful, growing up in the house of an elderly cousin. He grew up into a bright hard-boiled young man with a tremendous sense of destiny. Only he wasn't really hard-boiled or he could never have taken himself so seriously.

I wouldn't have been any good to him when it happened, even if I'd stuck to him. I couldn't have put the pieces of him together again because I would have despised him for going to pieces. I'd have been furious with him for just giving up, letting his whole professional training go to blazes. I wouldn't have pitied and comforted him. I'd probably have yelled at him.

Oh God, she thought in panic. Perhaps that's what he needed. Perhaps that's what he meant when he reproached me.

"You look sick," said Ames, "and I don't wonder after what you've just seen."

I'm not sick about Rich, you fool, she thought. He can handle his problem. He's young and whole.

Must I reproach myself for the rest of my life? He hadn't a soul to turn to, not one close friend among those bright young men, not one kinsman except that sick old lady. And he thought I'd walked out on him because I was tired of him, that I didn't even care enough about him to wait and say good-by.

"Livvy," said Ames, "take off that jacket, will you? I wish I hadn't made you wear it. You looked beautiful in it to-night. You still look beautiful. But it keeps reminding me of her. I hate to have you wearing anything of hers."

"I'll be taking it off in a minute upstairs," she said. "I'm going up as soon as she's quieter."

"Don't go up yet," he said. "It isn't late. Only twelve."

Twelve, she thought. How many more hours before I can get out of this place? From midnight to midnight to eight in the morning on Monday. That's thirty-two hours. I can sleep through sixteen of them, that's exactly half. I can always sleep and I can always eat, no matter what. The rest of the week end will be pure tedium, an endurance test. Nothing more can happen because it's all happened already, enough misery to last me for years to come. It's all happened in the few hours I've been here. How many? From four on Friday to four this afternoon to now. That's thirty-two. Another thirty-two hours. This is the halfway point, the great divide. The blasted week end is one half over.

"Take it off," said Ames. "I hate the sight of it."

He came over to her and took hold of the little coat by its glittering lapels. He slipped it off her shoulders and down over her hands and threw it behind the sofa. He hadn't touched her, but the smooth fabric sliding down her arms had made her shiver. His coming so near her, even when he didn't touch her, made her heart plunge as it hadn't when she was in his arms, dancing with him, and that was odd. Of course on the dance floor there had been a crowd of other people around them. But it wasn't his being alone with her now that made the difference. She looked at him almost fearfully. The difference was in him. He was friendly again, and what good was it to either of them now? He was smiling at her, his eyes very clear and bright.

you, I couldn't leave. Yes, I could, but I'd rather do the leaving before marriage than after, because after marriage it might hurt even worse. I won't live with a man who steps on my face without even bothering to explain to me why."

"Livy," he said. "Livy, my darling, sit down."

"No, I won't. I've finished. I'm going to bed."

"Sit down," he said again. "I haven't finished."

He put his hands on her shoulders, and the next minute, considerably surprised, she was sitting on the sofa. He could be violent, too.

"Now, listen to me," he said. "You don't know what happened at the lake this afternoon."

"I certainly do know. I pushed Daffy in. I interfered with your sister's discipline. I polluted the town water supply by jumping into it with my shoes on."

"Don't be silly," he said impatiently. "I'm talking about my mother. When I sent you all down to the pier, and Gracia and I stayed with Mother, something happened that gave me the worst shock of my life. Mother blew up. She went to pieces."

"Ames! What about?"

"About you."

It was bad news but it was the best possible news. He had had a good reason for shutting himself into himself. His mother's going to pieces was no mere trifle.

"Ames, tell me. Tell me!"

"She said, among other things, that you were hard and cruel, that if I married you you would ruin my life, and so on and so on. The point is, it's the first time she has ever interfered with any of us or tried to dictate. She has wanted affection from us more than power over us. She has trusted our judgment more than her own. I won't say she was

shrewd enough to realize that she could keep us closer to her by letting us go free or that if she used our affection for her as a stick to beat us with, the affection would soon wear thin. But Livy, that's how it's always been; she's loved us and trusted us and let us alone. Her explosion this afternoon was completely out of character. I couldn't have been more shocked, I think, if she'd had a paralytic stroke then and there or dropped dead of a heart attack before my eyes."

"Oh, my darling," said Livy. She put out her hands to him and let them fall again to her lap. He sat down on the sofa, turning half toward her, but he didn't look at her or offer to touch her.

"I suppose what's really happened," he said, "is that she's been going to pieces little by little since the bust-up over Rufus and especially since Dad died, but I haven't noticed. I knew she was fragile, physically, but otherwise she seemed the same to me, tactful and sweet and self-controlled. Livy, if she's going to turn into a trouble-maker now, my next ten years may be absolute hell. When I realized that, this afternoon, I gave you up because I was afraid that even if you took a chance and married me, you wouldn't be able to stick it; that eventually you'd give me up."

So that was why. Oh, my darling.

"Was it anything special I said or did that made her think I was cruel?"

"Various little things, I think, that she misinterpreted, but what finally touched off the fuse was the way you talked about your mother, criticizing her, dissecting her as impersonally as if she were nothing to you but an unconscious shape on an operating table. You did sound pretty hard-boiled about her, my dear. Oh, I know it's the way most people our age do talk. But Mother isn't accustomed to it,

and she's particularly sensitive to any criticism of any mother; she always takes it personally."

Livy shut her eyes. She was back in a stuffy furnished room at the top of an old house that looked out on the river. She was hearing again the cynical laughter and talk about women and love, and she was taking it personally, and suffering.

"You'd think," said Ames, "that at nearly seventy, having brought up three children, Mother would be somewhat toughened by now. But she's been wrapped in cotton wool all her life. She's still as sensitive and unreasonable, I suppose, as an inexperienced girl of twenty."

"Oh, Ames, I've been stupid about her," said Livy in a small voice. "I've been stupid about a great many things. I thought that because I'm nearing thirty and have been about, I'd learned about all there was to learn. Ames, it isn't my skin that's thick; it's my head."

He took her head between his hands and kissed her, not on her mouth but at one side, just under her lower lip, and she wondered why just there.

"You put on your lipstick so carelessly, my darling," he said, smiling, "that a casual observer could be fooled about the shape of your mouth, and that's a pity because it's a lovely mouth, tender and kind."

Then he stopped smiling. His arms hurt her, and she was thankful to be hurt. His fingers hurt her, pressing into her side under her low-cut dress, and she was glad the dress was cut so low. She was glad to be hurt.

I can deal with his mother, she thought. I can deal with Gracia. I can deal with Carl. All of them.

"You don't still feel that marriage is a bear trap, my darling? You're not afraid of being caught in something

that you can't escape from without being mangled?"

"I'm not afraid of anything, now."

"And you won't walk out on me, ever?"

"Never," she said. "Never. Never."

16

Two o'clock, ten past two in the morning, and they were still down there, talking. At least she hoped they were talking, because if they weren't, what could it possibly mean, their staying down there so long alone together? They weren't lovers. The afternoon at the lake had settled that. They weren't lovers. They weren't friends.

She stretched out flat on her bed, trying to relax, but how could she hope to sleep till they came upstairs? If she did drift off, she would rouse again, wider awake than ever, when Livy came into the room.

I must sleep, she thought. Tomorrow will be a difficult day. We shall all be on edge till Livy is out of the house. I've had two bad nights. The sleep I get after daylight doesn't seem to do me any good. I must sleep. I must sleep.

Never mind, she told herself. After tomorrow night, after she's gone forever, I shall have my room to myself. I can lie down in peace, alone, with Ames at peace and alone on the other side of the wall. I hope it won't take him long to get over her. He was contented enough till he met her. Perhaps, when she's gone for good, he'll find peace and contentment again. Some men never marry. He isn't like Rufus.

The room was cold. But it couldn't be, really, after such a hot day. The coldness must be within herself. She sat up in bed, drawing up her knees and locking her arms about them,

pressing her face against the hardness of her knees.

I'm not a cold woman. I'm not a frigid woman. I wanted to be happy in marriage and to make him happy. I wanted to be possessed. I wasn't ignorant. I knew what to expect and I wanted it. There isn't anything wrong with me. Plenty of wives are disappointed. I'm not the only one.

Plenty of wives hate marriage. But they don't all hate their husbands because of it.

I might have hated it just as much, she thought, if I'd married Ames instead of Rufus. But I'd have gone on loving Ames.

I ought to have married someone like Ames, she thought. Someone more like myself. And Rufus ought to have married someone more like himself, someone like Livy. Well, I needn't feel too guilty about him now. He has a wife who's right for him, who likes going to bed with him. If she hadn't liked it she wouldn't have given up her two children in order to marry him. She could have gone on deceiving her husband and allowed him to think that the third child was his.

The house was unbearably quiet.

Why didn't Ames and Livy come up, if they had nothing more to talk about? Rich hadn't come up, either. His step was heavy and she would have heard it even with her door shut. Perhaps he had come in and was with them down there.

That's it, she thought, relieved. Of course that's it. He's getting some comfort talking to Ames. But they can't speak frankly with Livy there. If she had any tact she would leave them alone together and come up to bed.

I'll get no sleep till she does. I must have sleep before tomorrow. I'll have to take something. I'll have to. I need it fully as much as Serena and Aunt Bethy. They're both asleep by now. I wish I were. If I take it now, I'll get a few hours of rest before daylight.

She wrapped her dressing gown about her and tiptoed into the hall. No voices came up to her. The silence was complete, yet it wasn't the silence of a house in which everyone slept. It was a peaceful silence, not oppressive, yet curiously awake and alive.

When she came out of the bathroom she crept to the head of the stairs and leaned over and down, clinging to the banister, straining her ears. The light below her in the little hall was blinding after the darkness of her bedroom. She could see nothing. She could hear nothing.

Why should her heart pound so? She wasn't spying. She wasn't eavesdropping. She only wanted to make certain that Rich was down there.

Laughter, warm and muffled, broke the silence, and she darted into her bedroom and shut the door and leaned against it, shivering.

Who had laughed? And why should the muffled warmth of laughter, overheard, make her face scorch while she quaked with cold?

She slipped into bed and buried her face in the pillow.

They aren't alone down there, she told herself fiercely. Rich is with them. He must be. Where else could he be? He can't just walk around the town all night. However hurt and angry he is, he'll have to come back to his bed at last, and he'll find Serena waiting. He'll have to lie down beside her. There isn't any other place for him to rest. And when he takes her into his arms, in the dark, he'll forgive her white lies and her black ones, he'll forget that she cheated him, he'll forget everything except that she loves him and that she is warm and tender and that she likes to lie in his arms in the dark.

The only unpardonable sin in a wife is lack of love. The helpless instinctive revulsion of the flesh.

She couldn't stop trembling. She couldn't stop thinking of Rufus. Her face still burned from the sound of that warm and quiet laughter, overheard. It was curious that a sound could be as intimate and tender as the touch of a lover's hand.

But they weren't lovers. They weren't.

The door opened quietly. There was a whisper, "Gracia, are you awake?" and then Ames said, not bothering to whisper, "Of course she's awake. I told you she never slept till the cocks crowed. I have a notion that she rides a broomstick through the sky all night. Where's the lamp?"

He laughed. Then she knew. It was he who had laughed like a lover.

The light was dazzling. She dragged the blanket up to her chin. They must not see how her very bones were quaking.

"Did Rich come in?"

She had to know. Perhaps when she knew, she could stop her spasm of trembling.

Ames closed the door. He came and sat on the edge of her bed. Her bed, this time. Not Livy's. He was looking at her, not at Livy.

"No, Rich didn't come in. I'd forgotten about him."

He had forgotten.

He said, "We needn't worry about him. The door isn't locked. He can get in any time."

They had been down there alone together all this time, talking, and part of the time, not talking.

She could only stare at him, mute, confused. He reached for her hands. He said, "Wow, your little paws are like ice. I must see about having those summer mittens knitted for you. Livy, you must learn how to knit."

"Never," said Livy.

He sighed.

"It's a terrible thing, Gracia. She isn't domesticated. She's barely housebroken, and Celeste says she will make an excellent mother. I should have supposed that nothing could persuade me to marry a girl of whom Celeste approved."

His voice was subdued but there was irrepressible gaiety in it.

"We're going to be married a month from now, Gracia, or as soon as the rush lets up at the Press and I can trust Charles to take over for a while. A man ought to have a little time off when he marries. That's only fair, isn't it?"

He was smiling at her, waiting for her to speak to him. She couldn't speak. If she had swallowed poison instead of two sleeping tablets, the kind of poison that stupefied and paralyzed before it killed, she would feel like this. The kind of poison that killed painlessly, but took time.

"You're pleased, aren't you, Gracia? I told Livy you would be. I told her that you said you liked her. That's why I had to tell you first, tonight, because you're on our side and I knew you would be pleased, and I had to tell somebody or burst. You are pleased, aren't you?"

His hands were folded warmly over hers, his eyes were on her eyes, pleading, insisting, counting on her to say what he wanted her to say. She had to answer. When he spoke to her like that, asking for reassurance and expecting it, trusting her to give it, she had to answer. Even if she were dying, she must answer.

"Of course I'm pleased. It's wonderful news. I'm so glad, Ames."

So glad. So glad. That didn't mean anything. It wasn't finished. So glad that what? That I feel as if I were about to die.

"And you'll help us to change Mother's attitude toward Livy, won't you?"

That meant that he had told Livy about his mother's outburst. Oh, how treacherous. The little thing would break her heart if she knew.

But Livy came first with him now. He would tell her everything. There would be no more safety, no more privacy. The merciless dark eyes of the stranger would look into secret places, and what she didn't understand she would ask about, and Ames would tell her. Because she was a stranger she might see more than he had ever seen. Because she was a woman and in love with him, she might understand what he had never noticed or tried to understand.

"You'll talk to Mother about Livy, won't you, Gracia? Mother will trust your judgment. She won't trust mine because she'll think that love has befuddled my wits."

It was necessary to answer, to reassure him, to promise help, because he expected it.

"I'll do anything I can, Ames."

Not only for you. For your mother, who has already suffered one catastrophe on my account, to whom I owe protection now that you will no longer protect her.

I must tell her before he can. I must go in to her early and give her time. I wish I hadn't taken those tablets. I must wake early. I must, I must.

"Let the poor girl go to sleep," said Livy. "Can't you see she's nearly dead for sleep? Her eyes are glazed."

He stood up instantly, remorseful. He gave Gracia's hands a hard squeeze and leaned to kiss her cheek.

"You're wonderful, Gracia. What would we do without you?"

We. It was we, now, already, and would be, forever. He used to say, What would I do without you? Only this morning in the kitchen, he had said it. And she had been able to answer lightly, Oh, I expect you'd get yourself a wife.

"There," he said, "tuck your little cold paws under the blanket and go to sleep."

She lay drowsy and dull. She hadn't even the strength to turn her face to the wall when he took Livy into his arms and kissed her mouth. Must he? Hadn't he had enough of kissing her down there in the silence alone with her? But a man in love, and not yet married, never had enough of kissing, and kissing was never enough.

Livy pushed him out and shut the door. With incredible quickness she stripped off her clothes, letting them fall where they would. She put out the light.

"I'm not going to wash my face or brush my teeth. Now you can sleep. I didn't take very long, did I?"

No, you've been marvelously quick. Two meetings and half a week end, and in a month you'll be his wife, sharing his room and his bed on the other side of the wall.

"You've been very quick."

Very quick. The quick and the dead. That's another meaning. Yes, you're very much alive. Is that why he loves you? The springs of the other bed creaked.

"Are you really pleased about us, Gracia, or did you say it because you had to, to be kind?"

The darkness was no protection. There was no place to hide. How could she answer? Livy would know that she lied. Livy loved him, too, and she was a woman and a stranger, looking into secret places with new eyes.

"You're not asleep already?"

"No. I'm not asleep."

She wasn't sleepy, only stupid and partially paralyzed. She was only partly aware of the bed under her. She seemed to be floating. She seemed to have no substance. Even in daylight he often looked through her as if she were the visible shape of a woman but transparent.

Why did I hope that he might be contented forever with what contented me? I've been happy, but I don't need very much to be happy. Just living under the same roof with him, seeing him every day, doing things for him, having him tell me things, has been enough for me. But what did he get from me? Devotion, the shape of love without substance or warmth. He saw it but looked straight through it and never knew it for what it was, and I was afraid to let him know. I was afraid of losing what I had.

Rufus got nothing from me and had to go elsewhere for comfort and warmth. Perhaps there is nothing in me for any man, even for Ames, whom I love.

"If you were me and I were you," said Livy softly, and her voice was part of the darkness, but warm and kind, "I'm afraid I should hate you."

She knows. She knows. Even in the dark there is no place in which to hide from her.

"If I'd been happily married and it had been spoiled," Livy went on very quietly as if she were soothing someone in pain, "or if I'd never had any happiness in love, I'm afraid I should hate the sight of happy lovers."

She is showing me a crevice in which to hide myself. How strange that is. She knows; she has seen and understood, yet she points out to me the place where I can conceal myself from her. Will she turn her back to it, then, and pretend she has never noticed?

"When I first came here," said Livy, "when nothing was settled between Ames and me and I didn't know if it ever could be settled the way I wanted it to be, the sight of Rich and Serena, safely married and sure of each other, made me sick with envy. I was even a little envious of Carl and Celeste. I was envious of all happy lovers, the married ones that were sure of each other."

"Carl?" repeated Gracia stupidly.

She heard the sharp intake of Livy's breath.

"I mean Charles. Charles Brittain. Doesn't anyone here ever call him Carl?"

"Nobody here has ever given him a nickname. He isn't the kind of man you know well enough, or like well enough, to give a nickname to."

Speaking wasn't so difficult after all. It was no more effort than thinking.

"Gracia, Gracia, you were happy in your marriage, weren't you, at first?"

"No," said Gracia. "Not even at first. I thought I would be. I thought marriage would be wonderful. I thought Rufus was wonderful. He thought he was, too."

Speaking was altogether too easy. It was thinking out loud, and thinking out loud was perilous.

"Oh," said Livy, "so Rufus was like that, was he? Somehow I thought he might be. Like Celeste. But Ames isn't, a bit."

"No, Ames isn't."

"You thought Rufus was wonderful and that being married to him would be wonderful, and then you married him and it wasn't. Did you hate him because you hated marriage?"

"I never hated him. I just stopped loving him. I wanted to sleep alone. Perhaps if I hadn't had to live with him, with that revulsion, I could have gone on being fond of him. He was very attractive. A lot of women were crazy about him. I guess he thought he was doing me a favor in marrying me. He'd have thought the same about any girl he married."

I shouldn't be saying these things. I must be talking in my sleep. People give themselves away when they talk in their sleep or when they're delirious or even when they're awake

and overexcited. Serena gave herself away tonight. In the morning she'll be sorry. No, she won't, because she doesn't believe that she did Rich any harm. But I did Rufus harm and I know it. I stopped loving him and I fell in love with Ames and I went on living with Rufus, loving Ames.

I mustn't think these things or I'll find myself saying them out loud and when I wake in the morning, I'll be sorry. She's guessed a part, not all. I mustn't tell her the rest.

"I'm not talking sense. You mustn't listen, Livy."

"It makes sense to me," said Livy.

"But why should you believe that I stopped loving Rufus before he stopped loving me?"

"Why shouldn't I believe it?"

"Because nobody else ever has. Not even Ames."

"You told Ames and he didn't believe you?"

"I told him that I stopped loving Rufus soon after I married him. I told him that to keep him from pitying me as a cast-off heartbroken wife. But it only made him pity me the more. He thought I was trying to save my pride."

"What's pride got to do with it?" asked Livy impatiently. "What credit is there in being the first to stop loving? It's sad and dreadful, whichever stops first. It's sad and dreadful to go on loving a man after he's stopped loving you, but it must be just as dreadful to have to go on living with a man after you've stopped loving him. Why did you, Gracia? How could you bear it? Why didn't you tell him that you wanted to be free? Why didn't you leave him?"

Because I couldn't leave Ames. I would never have seen him again.

I mustn't say it. I mustn't even think it or I may hear myself saying it aloud.

"This was my home. This had become my family. I was happy here, except for living with Rufus. I could put up

with that in order to go on living in this family. I thought I could pretend, but love is one thing you can't pretend about, isn't it? And he found consolation elsewhere, and when the scandal broke, he told his father why he had gone elsewhere; that I didn't love him; that I was frigid; and his putting the blame on me was worse than adultery in his father's eyes. His father blamed him; the town blamed him; and I let him take the blame while I took the pity. It would have been better if I had left him soon after the marriage. It would have been honest and decent. It would have been brave."

"You have too sensitive a conscience," said Livy. "Ceasing to love isn't a crime any more than it's something to be proud of. It's sad and dreadful, that's all. And it isn't always easy to know what to do about it. If you had left him, the injury to his self-esteem might have been harder for him to take than the whole town's blame. I take it that he didn't tell anyone except his father why he was unfaithful."

She finds excuses for me that I cannot use. She gives me comfort that I cannot take. But in a moment she will ask the final question and what can I answer?

The question trembled in the darkness as if already it had been uttered, "Did you fall in love with Ames because you were unhappy with Rufus, or were you unhappy with Rufus because you had fallen in love with Ames?"

How can I answer when I don't know the answer?

The springs creaked gently. Livy was turning over to face the wall that shut her away from her love. She was through with questioning. She was ready for sleep.

She will sleep, thought Gracia. There is nothing to keep her wakeful. She has nothing to regret. And I shall sleep, too. I wish I could sleep forever.

THERE was a lively breeze tossing the ruffled curtains, making the clean green leaves rustle and flutter. The day was brilliant but it would be cool with all that air moving.

Livy looked across to the other bed where Gracia, facing her, lay sleeping soundly but frowning a little even in sleep.

I shouldn't have led her on to talk last night. She'll be sorry for it this morning when she wakes and remembers. But perhaps she'll remember only what she told me in actual words, and that wasn't so much.

I wish I didn't know so much about her. I wish I didn't know so much about several members of this family. I know too much about Mrs. Chelsea's attitude toward me. I know too much about Celeste's husband. But haven't I always said I'd rather know where I stand and what I'm up against?

In the bathroom, scrubbing sleep out of her eyes, she got soap into them the way she used to when she was small. They smarted like fury. She used to stamp and yell for help when she was small. She couldn't do that now, no matter how serious her discomfort. Even with things settled happily between Ames and herself, she couldn't tell him what she knew about Gracia and about Carl and ask him what to do, if anything. She had no right to tell him what Carl and Gracia chose to keep secret.

All I can do, she thought, is be careful. I'm not very good

at being careful.

The toad she had swallowed on Friday was back in her middle, a small clammy lump of nervousness that wasn't a dead weight, like grief, because occasionally it moved, sickeningly. Usually in the morning, especially when the morning was bright like this one, she had courage for anything, more than she needed, a sense of complete adequacy and plain joyful bull-headed optimism. She wasn't optimistic now. She knew too much.

I can learn to live in peace with Mrs. Chelsea, she told herself. I can do that because I must. I can make Gracia fond of me. I can teach her to trust me. If I'm careful she needn't know that she told me too much last night in the dark. But what shall I do about Carl? I told him I would be leaving on Monday at eight. I told him he could count on that, so he let his defenses down. He acknowledged me. He acknowledged a part of his life which Hotchkiss and the Chelseas and his own wife don't know about. Not me, only, but the part of his life to which I belonged. I wonder if he had managed to forget it until I came on Friday and made him remember? And now I must tell him that I shall be here always, living in his own back yard, practically, a member of the family of which he is a member, a constant reminder to him of what he once valued.

What does he value now? His children? His wife? He has the right wife for him. She did for him what I could never have done. She put the pieces together again.

Downstairs the front door stood open. Outside on the lawn Florence was stalking sparrows. Livy stood at the screen door and watched. What was the use of trying to stop the cat? No amount of cuffing would change her nature. It was her nature to catch and kill.

There was a small dry cough, and Livy turned to con-

front the snapping black eyes of Mrs. Prout.

"Oh, you're back, Mrs. Prout. I hope that means that you're feeling better."

The cook's lipless mouth widened slightly. Could she be trying to smile?

At least I'm decently covered this morning, thought Livy, as the small eyes traveled down her from white blouse to red skirt to conventional stockings and shoes.

"There ain't nothing wrong with me," announced Mrs. Prout. "I told Mr. Ames he was wasting his money on all them x-rays and foolishness. They won't show nothing. The doctor said it was probably gas pains. He said I was remarkable for my age."

She said it in triumph as if she had put something over on somebody.

"Your name's Livy, ain't it?"

Why, she was positively chatty.

"Yes," admitted Livy.

"That's short for Olivia, ain't it? My name's Olivia, too," said Mrs. Prout, "only I been called Ollie all my life. Funny, us having the same name, ain't it? I never knowed anybody before that had my name. It ain't real common."

She cackled suddenly, and raised a small hard hand to pat her dyed hair. She was pleased with herself and her world.

"I been thinking," she said. "I been thinking if my grandson Benjy could get to be a corporal, maybe, by the time Mr. Ames joined up, like you said, Mr. Ames'd have to take orders from Benjy, maybe."

That seemed to amuse her vastly.

"I guess I better let Benjy stay in the service," she said. "I guess it's about time I got him off my hands and had myself a vacation. Be kind of a rest to me to live by myself a

while. You like some coffee? I made extra."

Perhaps her friendliness was a good omen. I hope so, thought Livy, carrying her cup to the front step. I need a good omen.

She didn't drink the coffee.

The Howes' old yellow roadster was parked in the driveway. Rich, still in dinner clothes, was slumped over the wheel, his head on his arms. Livy went over to him, cup in hand.

"Rich. Rich! Wake up and drink this."

His face, when he lifted it, was blotched and puffy; his eyes, without his glasses, looked weak and colorless. He stared at her and then down at his rumpled clothes. She could see him remembering and she turned her eyes away. She hoped that remembering hadn't brought Carl such anguish.

She held out the cup of strong black coffee.

"Drink it down, Rich, every drop."

He took it and drank.

"Did you sleep out here all night, Rich? You must feel awful. Better get out of those clothes and into a real bed."

"No," he said and gave her back the cup. "I can't go to bed. There isn't time. I have things I must do. I didn't mean to sleep at all. I was waiting for daylight. I don't see well enough to drive at night. I have to go out to the School and pack and see the Head."

Pack. So he was going to join his uncle.

"I can catch a two o'clock train to New York," he said. "Will you wait until two, please, before you tell her?"

She was appalled.

"You expect me to tell her? You're going without seeing her? Rich, you can't. And I can't. My telling her would make it twice as bad."

"If I see her again," he said, "I may not be able to leave her."

She had no answer for that.

"I thought it all out in the night," he said. He brought out his spectacles and hooked them on. "I want you to know that I'm grateful to you, Livy. If you hadn't said all you did about my going on the expedition, I wouldn't have had the guts to suggest going without her. I'd have given up and stayed, and her trick would have worked. I never would have found out, probably."

"You'd have been happier if you never had found out."

"No," he said slowly. "I'd rather know where I stand."

His face twisted as if he were going to weep, and his voice cracked in the middle, "But why couldn't she have been square with me? Why did she let me talk and talk? She pretended to be interested. She pretended to be sympathetic when Uncle Jake was sick and I was worried to death about him. She pretended to be just as anxious as I was. Well, I guess that wasn't pretense; she was anxious all right; anxious for him to die."

"Rich," said Livy, "Rich, don't leave her without seeing her. Don't leave her with all that bitterness in your mind."

"I'll get rid of the bitterness in the next few months," he said. "I'll be too busy to think about it much. I'll come back the first of the year, if she wants me to."

"She'll want you to, of course. She's terribly in love with you. She hasn't done any pretending about that, Rich."

"I know it," he said steadily. "I thought it all out in the night and I believe I've got it straight. She pretended to be what I wanted her to be, in order to please me. She wouldn't injure me deliberately. She thought my wanting to go on the expedition was just a crazy idea and if I didn't outgrow it I'd have to be frustrated as painlessly as possible. She didn't

even see how bad I'd feel about the particular kind of trick she used to frustrate me. She didn't know that it was about the rottenest trick a woman could play on a man who loved her. If she had known, she wouldn't have tried it; she'd have thought up some other. She's going to feel very bad about my going off without seeing her, and I'd like her to know and I'd like you to know, too, that I'm not doing it to punish her. She thought she was justified in doing what she did, and in a way I pushed her into it; I expected too much of her; I ought to have had sense enough to realize she wasn't the sort of girl to put up with the discomforts of a trip like that. Why, she wouldn't even camp out for a week last summer when we had the chance; I thought it was because she didn't care for the couple who invited us. She doesn't want to see new places and strange people. She likes it right here. Summer before last I suggested that we drive out to Colorado, but she said the summers here were a lot of fun and Aunt Bethy was counting on our visiting her and we mustn't disappoint her. One reason she liked my having the job at Upham was our being near enough Hotchkiss to come home week ends. She still calls this home."

Florence leaped to the hood of the roadster and sat there, complacent, uttering little sociable mewling sounds.

"It's no good trying to change her nature," said Rich. "If I have a few months away from her, doing what I've always hoped to do, I'll be glad to come back to her. If I don't go now, I may hold it against her all my life. I might even come to hate her. Don't try to explain that to her. Just tell her I'll write her from New York and later on from Manáos. The money in the savings account is enough to take care of her, and it's in both our names. I'll leave the roadster at the School. She can pick it up there when she

goes out to pack her things. Perhaps Ames will drive her out."

"You're leaving her on Ames' hands?"

"On Aunt Bethy's hands," said Rich. "I have to."

That means on Ames' hands and mine, she thought, dismayed. But she couldn't protest.

"Good-by, Livy," he said, "and thanks."

She shooed Florence off the hood. The yellow roadster made considerable racket, starting. She watched it out of sight.

When Ames came down, she was still sitting on the front step, the empty cup beside her. He pushed his forehead against the screen and smiled at her.

"Eating worms again? Come in and help me get something fit to eat."

"Mrs. Prout is getting breakfast," she said.

"She's back, is she?" he tipped his head toward the kitchen. "I hear something strange. A cackling sound. Don't tell me she's brought in a flock of hens to make sure of the freshness of our breakfast eggs."

"That's Mrs. Prout cackling. She's laughing."

"Oh, she can't be. I didn't think it was possible for her to laugh. I thought even a smile would crack the skin of her tough old muzzle. What's she laughing about?"

"Well," said Livy, "she told me she'd been thinking. Maybe the process tickles the inside of her skull."

Mrs. Prout kicked back the kitchen door and thumped a plate of butter down on the table.

"You better eat," she said. "Popovers ain't no good after they've set."

"Livy," said Ames, and drew her in, "come and pour out my coffee. Get used to your job."

He kissed her soundly, partly for Mrs. Prout's benefit, to be sure, but also for his own benefit, or so it seemed. Certainly there was nothing perfunctory about his kiss.

Mrs. Prout made no comment but as she retired to the kitchen the switch of her percale skirt was downright skittish.

"Sit here," said Ames and pulled back a chair.

"But that's Gracia's place," Livy hesitated. "It's her place at breakfast and your mother's place at dinner."

"Your place," he said, "after we're married. Your place this morning. Sit."

She obeyed. He stood behind her chair a moment, his hands on her shoulders. He bent and put his lips against her ear.

"It's going to be fun being married to you," he said under his breath. "I'm going to like waking up in the morning better than I ever have before. I'm going to like going to bed at night. You're sweet, Livy."

She couldn't match his light-heartedness. He wasn't worrying any more about their life together or about how his family would like her or about anything at all. He had handed all his worries over to her, and they weighed her down.

Mrs. Prout brought in the coffee and a platter of bacon.

"You see," said Ames when she had darted back to the kitchen, "you've been accepted. You aren't company any more. She won't wait on table when we have company."

Mrs. Prout brought in the popovers.

"They riz," she said with satisfaction.

"Don't they always?" asked Livy.

"Depends how I feel," said the cook. "They're notional. If I'm low in my mind, they stays flat on purpose to spite me."

Ames said, "Then you're feeling better than yesterday."
The spark in her eyes was pure malice.

"It wasn't nothing but one of my spells, and I don't need no doctor to say what I should do. I put a wet cloth on my head and I had a good lay-down and by night I was ready for victuals and I had a pork chop. Nothing I relish like a good fried pork chop when I've just got over a spell."

The door swung to behind her.

"Ames," said Livy, "about the draft. How soon do you think you'll be called?"

"Not for a year. We'll have a year together, Livy. After we've had that, we can stand a year apart, can't we, darling?"

We'll have to stand it. And it may be more than a year. I'll be left here with Gracia and Mrs. Chelsea. With Carl. Always before I've done the leaving myself. Now I'll be left, ringed round with foes.

"Charles will manage the Press while you're away?"

"He'll have to. Celeste will have to help him. He's no good to the army, of course, with that hand, although he's within the age."

"I didn't notice until last night that there was anything wrong with his hand."

"He's expert at keeping it concealed. He's morbidly sensitive about it the way some people are about a scar or a disfiguring birthmark. Celeste asked us not to speak about it to him, ever. She says it happened when he was in school. Some sort of cut, and gangrene set in."

Livy looked down at her plate.

"It could have ruined his future, if he'd planned to be, oh, a violinist, or a surgeon. Something like that."

Ames laughed, not cruelly, but as if she had said something wholly fantastic.

"He didn't plan to be either, I'm certain of that. He hates music and the sight of blood makes him sick. He won't even bandage a scratch for the children."

You know nothing about him. Nothing.

"Has he told you anything about his early life, Ames?"

"Not much. There isn't much to know. He hasn't any family except us. He grew up in Padua with an elderly cousin, but that was after Mother's time, so we never knew him and we never met the old lady. After she died there wasn't any money left; it had been used up on his schooling and her illness; and he turned up at the Press, job-hunting. It was natural he should come to Hotchkiss, the nearest town to Padua and enough larger to offer a chance of employment."

"He and Celeste are happily married, aren't they?"

"Oh yes, they're very well suited. He likes being told what to do and she likes telling him."

I would never have told him what to do. I would have despised him for not standing on his own feet. Perhaps that's what he needed; someone to yell at him, someone to sting him with contempt, someone to force him to plan a new life for himself; not someone to plan his life for him. If I had been there to rail at him, he would have hated me and left me. It mightn't have worked; he might have gone to pieces just the same, but at least he couldn't have reproached me now and I needn't reproach myself.

I won't, I won't reproach myself. I had to leave him when I did. Feeling as I did, I couldn't have stayed. It would have been dishonest. It would have been like Gracia staying on with Rufus. Only in her case it was her love for him that was destroyed. With me it was my self-respect. She stayed and I broke away, and with us both it adds up to the same thing. Self-reproach. Guilt. Regret.

I won't be like her. I swear I won't. I will regret nothing. Nothing except that I ever knew him. Nothing except that I loved him.

"Darling, what's troubling you?" Ames asked.

"Nothing," she said.

"You'd better spit it out, Livy. The trouble between us yesterday, you remember, was my shutting up when you sensed that something was wrong. You aren't going to turn the tables on me, are you, now that we've settled everything and are happy?"

I can't tell you until Carl says I may. I can't tell you about Carl, or about Gracia, or about Rich's going away. All these things are troubling me, and I'm not allowed to share the trouble with you.

"You aren't regretting anything, Livy?"

Yes, I am. I've been telling myself for eight years that I regretted nothing, and now regret has caught up with me.

"You're not sorry that we made our peace last night and that we're going to be married in a month?"

"Oh, Ames, no. I only wish we could be married sooner. I wish we could be married tomorrow."

"We can," he said, "if you don't mind staying here till the yearbook rush is over at the Press. We do a quantity of high school and college yearbooks and they have to be ready before the various graduations. It makes a hectic few weeks right now but it brings in good money."

"We'd better wait until July as we planned," she said, "and I'll spend this month in Littlefield with Pa."

It will do me good, she thought, to spend some time in Littlefield with Pa and Aunt Min. It will be almost like going back to my beginnings to start over. No, it won't. Nobody can ever start over.

"What I meant," she said, "was that I wished we could

be married tomorrow and go away somewhere, the two of us, to some place new, and never come back."

It wouldn't be starting over, but it would be leaving Hotchkiss free for Carl, with nothing to remind him of what he doesn't wish to remember.

Ames was frowning, seriously troubled.

"You don't like our having to live with Mother and Gracia, or rather, their having to live with us. I can't blame you, Livy, but darling, I'm responsible for them. I can't afford to build another house and leave this to them, and I can't turn them out of this one; this is their home; I built it for them; it's my house but it's their home. The responsibility isn't merely financial, either. It's more than that. Dad left Mother on my hands and Rufus left Gracia on my hands."

Yes, and now Rich has left Serena for you to take care of, not for good, but for part of a year; for a full half of our first year of marriage, the only year of being together that we can be sure of for heaven knows how long.

I could have said, Rich, you've got to stay and look after your wife.

I could have bullied him. I could have roused the whole house to prevent his going.

No, I couldn't.

"Ames, I don't mind. I don't mind anything if you love me. You do, don't you?"

"What do you think?" he asked. He came up to her end of the table and kissed her. "Come on. Let's go up and tell Mother. Let's make it public and legal and everything."

In the upper hall, outside his mother's closed door, Florence sat washing her innocent face.

"Should we tell her, too?" asked Livy.

A furry paw darted.

"Damnation," said Livy. "She's snagged my stocking."

Florence elevated a hind leg and began washing her stomach.

Ames tapped at the door and Gracia opened it instantly, smiling brightly. Too brightly, Livy noticed.

"Aunt Bethy," said Gracia, "here's Ames to see you, and Livy, too."

"Don't go, Gracia," said Ames, but she slipped out past him and into her own room.

He dreaded going in to his mother. Livy could see that. His dread communicated itself to her, and perspiration broke out in the palms of her hands.

I must break down her resistance quickly, she thought. I must make her like me in spite of herself. Up till now I have held back, but I must win her quickly now to put an end to his dread.

Mrs. Chelsea was in bed, propped against pillows, her scanty hair very neat, her shoulders muffled in a woolly white bed jacket. She fluttered her hands in welcome, tweaked the blanket, touched her powdered cheeks, reached out to Ames and fastened upon his sleeve.

Gracia came in early to prepare her, thought Livy. Maybe she didn't tell her anything, but she made her tidy. It's tough to receive bad news before you've even had a chance to wash your face in the morning. I wonder if Gracia even has to wash the little thing's face for her; bring a wet cloth and a towel to the bed. What slavery. Or what affection. Or is it expiation?

"They make me stay in bed till noon, Livy," Mrs. Chelsea's head was tipped to the side, archly, her faded eyes so wide that the irises had rims of white all around, "to keep me out of mischief."

Oh God, thought Livy in despair, I shall never feel at ease

with her. If only she wouldn't try so hard and overdo everything. I don't want to hurt her; she's old and brittle; even if she weren't precious to him, I wouldn't want to hurt her. But I can never be natural with her if she won't be natural with me.

"Mother," said Ames, "we've news for you."

The archness crumbled. Mrs. Chelsea's head jerked like a doll's head fastened on with faulty elastic. She looked as brittle as a china doll, but glass eyes wouldn't have shown such terror.

"Oh, please!" burst out Livy. "Please don't look so frightened, Mrs. Chelsea. I'm not going to ruin his life."

The little thing flinched, her chin quivering.

"Don't, don't," begged Livy, vehement even in pity, a little resentment mixed in with the pity. "I'm not hard and cruel. I'm not a monster. You've got the wrong idea of me."

The faded blue eyes flew to Ames in an agony of reproach. But why? Livy wondered frantically. What has he done to her? How has he betrayed her? In loving me? Oh no, I see. In telling me what she said about me. Now he will be angry with me, for letting her know that he told me.

But he wasn't angry. He reached out for her hand and gave it a hard reassuring pressure. He was on her side now, no matter what mistakes she made.

"Indeed she isn't a monster, Mother. She's wonderful and she's going to marry me. Tell us that you're pleased, Mother. Wish us joy."

His other hand was on Mrs. Chelsea's locked ones. He was putting words into her mouth, and she gave them back to him, tremulously, "Oh, I am pleased, dearest. I do wish you joy. It's wonderful news."

She even managed a smile, a fixed and unnatural one that made Livy's face ache with looking at it.

"Oh, Ames, don't make her pretend to be pleased. Bad news is hard enough to take without having to pretend it's good news," said Livy. "Mrs. Chelsea, I'm sorry I'm not the kind of girl you wanted for Ames. No, that isn't true. If I'd been different from what I am, he wouldn't have fallen in love with me. What I'm sorry for is that you don't like me the way I am, because I don't imagine I'll change much from now on. I'm twenty-eight and pretty well fixed in my pattern, and if I did change much, he might stop loving me."

Mrs. Chelsea's face went blank, as if the mechanism inside the doll, whatever it was, had broken, and her eyes wouldn't even close any more. Livy was frightened. If the little thing had a stroke right then and there, it would be the finishing touch to a terrible week end.

But Mrs. Chelsea was speaking with perfect distinctness, exhausted but calm, "It's all right. Everything will be all right. All I want, dearest, is for you to be happy."

It's true, thought Livy. It isn't an act. She's past the effort of putting on an act.

"Mrs. Chelsea, he'll be happy with me. Truly he will. I love him very much. Trust me. I'll make him happy."

"Gracia and I will move back to the old house," said Mrs. Chelsea. "Young people should live by themselves when they marry."

Ames gasped.

"But Mother, you'll hate living with Celeste."

"When you built this house," said his mother, "and Celeste moved into the big one, she said I must come to her when you married. You've had more than your share of family responsibility, dearest. I'm not going to be a nuisance to you and neither is Gracia. I've always thought, in regret and sorrow, that Rufus and Gracia might have been happy together, always, if they could have had a place to themselves

from the start."

Ames' eyes met Livy's. He said quietly, "Well, Mother, if you feel that way about it, we could try it for the first year, anyhow."

His eyes on Livy's said, You see? It will all come right. We'll have our first year alone together. That's what you wanted, isn't it?

18

“You know what will happen,” said Livy. “As soon as Celeste gets the poor little thing into the same house with her, right under her thumb, she’ll argue your mother into a coma and have all her teeth snatched out.”

They had talked and talked and it was nearly eleven, time for Celeste to bring the little girls back from Sunday School. At eleven they would go over to the other house and talk some more, with Celeste.

Ames was in no hurry to go. It was pleasant sitting with Livy in the window seat, looking out on the front lawn, with Florence asleep on his knees.

“Your mother won’t like living with Celeste,” said Livy. “She’s afraid of her. She’s afraid of me, too, but she might get over it after she’d lived in the same house with me a while. This way she’ll never get used to me, and she’ll blame me for making her live with Celeste.”

“She made the decision herself,” said Ames, stroking the cat. “I told you I couldn’t turn her out of this house. Neither can I force her to remain in it.”

“And Gracia won’t like living over there,” said Livy. “She’ll have to mind the children oftener than she does now.”

“If Gracia doesn’t choose to go,” he said, “she needn’t go. She’s a free agent.”

"Nobody with a kind heart and any ties of affection is a free agent," said Livy, "nobody, that is, who has got past the callousness of extreme youth. Gracia is much too fond of your mother and much too kind-hearted to leave her, unprotected, at Celeste's mercy."

"You're hard to please," said Ames. "A while ago you were depressed because Mother and Gracia had to live with us, and now you're depressed because they aren't going to."

He said it lightly but he was a good deal moved by her concern for his mother's peace of mind and Gracia's, too. It proved, didn't it, how wrong about her his mother was? He had been wrong about her, too, in certain ways. He had been sure that she was kind, but he had thought her heedless; he had wanted to punish her for her irresponsibility. Now, instead, he wanted to protect her. Until now he had considered other people's feelings before he considered hers. She had seemed tough enough to take care of herself. He had been mistaken about her callousness, taken in by her manner. From now on he would consider her first, all others second. That was only right, wasn't it? The happiness and peace of mind of a wife should be her husband's first concern. It was not only right but pleasant from a purely selfish standpoint, because her happiness and peace would be his happiness and peace.

"Where's Gracia, Ames?"

"In the garden. Weeding, I expect."

"It's going to be hard for her to leave her garden."

"Darling, she won't be leaving it. She can come over every day and work in it. The other house is only a stone's throw away."

She winced.

"I hate that expression," she said. She pushed the hair back from her forehead. "A stone's throw. I can feel a goose egg

rising. Ames, it won't feel like her garden when she doesn't live in this house. And won't it be painful for her, going back to the house where she lived with Rufus? It's painful to be reminded of what you've managed to forget."

"Darling, don't think about her. Think about us."

"I have to think about her, Ames, because of us, because we're happy and she isn't."

"But she is, Livy. She told me so."

"When?"

"Yesterday morning. We were talking about this house, and the terrible time we had building it, and she said she'd been wonderfully happy in it."

"And now," said Livy, "I'm driving her out of it."

"No, you're not. If she leaves it, it will be affection for Mother that makes her go, and you aren't driving Mother away; she's going of her own choice because I'm marrying, not because it's you that I'm marrying."

"Ames," said Livy, "why haven't you married Gracia?"

He put a hand to his head.

"Now I'm the one," he said, "who feels a goose egg rising. Why don't you warn me before you hit out like that?"

"Ames, why haven't you fallen in love with her? How could you help it? She's been free from Rufus for five years; she's been right in the house with you all this time; she's young, she's attractive, she's devoted to your mother; she gets on with all the members of your family; she thinks you're perfect, and you think she's perfect."

"But I'm not in love with her, Livy. I never have been. I never could be. It's a kind of block. She's Rufus' girl. She was Rufus' girl when I first met her, and I'll never be able to think of her as anything else. I gave up trying to fill Rufus' shoes a long time ago. I gave up trying to be spectacular and popular. I gave up trying to win cups and tro-

phies. I gave up being interested in the kind of girl that Rufus took to. I had enough of it while I was growing up, always being compared with him, always falling short. It's made me dislike any sort of competition. That's why I didn't want to go into the Press at first, because Rufus was in it already and doing well; he did everything well. But I couldn't find anything else to do, and I couldn't expect Dad to go on supporting me after I finished college, so I went into the Press and then there was the row and Dad threw Rufus out and I had to stay on. I like it well enough now."

"The Chelsea Press is a fine red herring," said Livy, "but I won't be led aside from the main issue. Do you hate competition when it comes to women?"

"Yes," he said. "Do you mind, darling? Would it make you feel more valuable if I had snatched you away from a horde of suitors?"

"No. I feel valuable because you love me. There wasn't any competition in sight when you first saw me. If there had been, would you have stayed away from me?"

He didn't answer.

"How can you know?" she said, and laughed. "But I know one thing. No matter who else was around, I should have thrown myself at your head just the same."

He wanted to believe it. He did believe it.

"You let me feel sure of you from the beginning," he said.

"I certainly did," she said. "It would have been a bad mistake with some men. It would have scared them away. I began to wonder, when I didn't hear from you for six weeks, if I'd made a mistake, not in throwing myself at your head, but in thinking you were the kind of man who wouldn't be scared away by it."

"If I hadn't felt sure of you, Livy, I couldn't have fallen

in love with you."

"If you had proved to be easily scared," she said, "I'd have stopped loving you easily."

"If I ever stop being sure of you, Livy, I'll stop loving you. I'll never be a jealous husband."

"You mean that if you ever stop feeling sure of me, you'll just stop being my husband. That feeling isn't retroactive, is it? Because I've been in love before, you know. Twice before, and I don't mean calf love, either."

"Of course you've been in love before," he said, "but not with anyone I know, not with anyone I'm ever likely to see or have to think about."

She slid off the window seat.

"It must be eleven or after," she said. "Let's go and see Celeste and get it over with."

He transferred the sleeping cat from his lap to the padded seat, taking pains not to rouse her.

"There," he said. "Dream on, my pretty one."

"I still think," said Livy, "that if she were my cat, I'd call her Cytherea."

When they went out and around the house, they found the gate to the garden standing wide open. Gracia was cutting the iris. She had a small sharp knife and she was slashing away at the stalks, pushing aside the swordlike leaves, cutting close to the ground, tossing the curly pale blue blossoms into a heap on the turf. There were pink spots in the hollows of her cheeks and little beads of sweat on her upper lip and high curving forehead. She had on the flowered organdy dress she had worn on Friday. It showed the thinness of her upper arms, the smallness of her neck, the little bones that protruded at the base of her throat.

"Gracia!" said Ames, astonished. "What's got into you?"

She straightened up. Her smile was fixed and bright.

"It's a celebration," she said. She sounded almost defiant. "You don't get yourself engaged every day, you know. Besides, I got to thinking this morning, how wasteful to leave these lovely things here back of the house where nobody can see them without making a special trip. I'm going to fill the house with them."

He was a little embarrassed, he didn't know why.

Her eyes went past him to Livy. She said, "Livy, don't you think it would be a good idea to plant a quantity of hardy perennials here next year? A spring garden goes by all in a minute, almost before you realize it's in bloom. And taking up the bulbs is an awful fuss. Why not have a lot of good sturdy plants that don't have to be cherished but will go on flourishing year after year of their own accord? A lot of good bright color. All sorts of colors. I think I'd like that for a change. Wouldn't you like it, Livy?"

He waited a moment for Livy to answer and when she didn't he said, "I think it would be swell."

He was surprised when Livy turned abruptly and walked away toward Celeste's. He had to hurry to overtake her.

"Did you notice," he asked her, "how Gracia's brightened up and sort of loosened up? But you wouldn't notice, of course. You don't know her well enough."

Livy said nothing. Her eyes were fixed on the ground. It wasn't necessary to watch her footing, either. The walking was smooth under the tall old trees. There was a pattern of sunlight and shadow upon her that flickered over her as she moved.

"It's going to be good for Gracia to have you in the family, darling, a girl her own age, congenial to her, and spirited. You said yourself that she was too young to spend her days companioning an elderly woman, and she's never had initiative enough to get out and make friends for herself in

Hotchkiss."

"I'd like to be friends with her," said Livy in a low voice, "if I thought she would have me."

They had come to the edge of Celeste's kitchen garden. Vigorous green was showing along the neat rows.

"Look," said Ames, almost in indignation. "The stuff grows almost while you watch. The best kitchen garden in town. It's infuriating. Celeste doesn't know the first thing about gardening, or didn't until a year ago when she read a book; she doesn't garden for the fun of it or even because she likes to eat what she raises; she says plainly that she'd just as soon eat canned or dried stuff. But the doctor said she must have fresh air and sunshine and exercise. So she started this garden and last summer she not only supplied her own table but sold us what was left over, at a slight profit; she charged more than the market price because her produce was free her."

He pulled up a red and white radish.

"Have one. It will go on my bill."

"Doesn't she ever fail at anything, Ames?"

He shook his head ruefully.

"I'm petty enough to wish she would. I'd like her better, I think, if she ever had one real frustration."

"She wants more children," said Livy. "She's had to put off having them on account of her health and the cost."

"But she'll have them eventually," said Ames. "You'll see. Postponement isn't failure. Celeste never fails, confound her."

They went around to the front of the house. Behind the broad green leaves of Dutchman's pipe the door stood open. Ames shouted, "Anybody home?" as he stepped inside. There was no answer and he made his way to the kitchen.

Livy waited in the gloomy high-ceiled hall, remembering

Friday afternoon. The depression of the house was a dead weight pressing down upon her.

I don't have to worry about him, she told herself resolutely. Celeste has taken charge of his life and she never fails. Things are all working out. I ought to be madly happy. I oughtn't to think about anyone except us. Ames and me. We're sure of each other. Nothing can spoil what we have. We'll have trouble; we'll have failures and frustrations; we'll have sorrow, but what's between us can't be spoiled. We're sure of each other.

Ames came back to her.

"Roselle says Charles is up on the third floor and Celeste will be back with the children any minute. Let's go up and wait, shall we? You ought to see the top of the house. It's much the best. It used to be my kingdom. Now it's Charles'. What used to be the main storeroom is his study, and he has my little bedroom adjoining it."

Livy looked at him sharply.

"You mean they don't sleep together?"

"Not since Phyllis," he started up the stairs. "I'll lead the way and announce us. Celeste says Charles won't let her risk another baby until her health is better and that while sleeping apart is hard on them both it's the only reliable method of prevention."

She followed slowly. The stairs seemed very steep.

He won't let her risk another baby. He must love her. He must. He does, of course. My not happening to like her doesn't mean that she is unlovable. 'Ames' not liking her doesn't mean much, either, because brothers and sisters often don't get on.

The second flight of stairs was just as steep and very long.

"Don't wait for me, Ames. Let me do my puffing in private."

I wish my heart wouldn't beat so fast, as if I were nervous. There is nothing for me to worry about. He has a wife who loves him and whom he loves. He has two vigorous children. He has a home, an income, position in the community.

"Hi, Charles!" said Ames, above her.

The door at the top of the stairs opened. The familiar-bored and gentle voice said, "Come in. Celeste will be back presently. Did you want to see her?"

"We want to see both of you," said Ames. "Livvy is with me," and went past his brother-in-law.

Livvy's feet were leaden. Her breath was very short. Ames had gone out of her sight. He hadn't gone far. He was in the sunlight of that room at the top of the stairs. But in the doorway, looking down at her, standing between her and the reassurance of Ames' presence, was Carl Brittain.

She couldn't breathe. She couldn't lift her feet to mount the last three steps.

It was a trick of the light, and the familiar situation, the open doorway at the top of the long steep flight, the sunlight in the room behind him, the familiar outline of his head and his broad shoulders, the familiar way he stood, lounging a little, listless, but with a kind of grace. It was his having no coat on, his white shirt open at the neck without a tie, his sleeves rolled up above his elbows.

He was Carl Brittain, young and whole again.

She shut her eyes.

It was only a trick of the light and the situation, but she couldn't breathe because of the way her heart beat.

Three steep flights to a room up under the roof, hot in summer and drafty in winter, but with a view of the river. A long climb up, but they hadn't minded the stairs.

"It's a steep climb but you don't mind a few stairs, do you?"

She opened her eyes again. She had to. His half-smile was ironic.

If he could remind her, deliberately like that, then remembering couldn't be painful to him.

But it was, to her.

Three steep flights. She had always run all the way up in the hope that he would be there, ahead of her, waiting to fling open the door and catch her up into his arms.

"I do mind the stairs," she said. "I'm feeling my age."

The need to reach Ames, to be close to him, to touch him, to hear his voice, dragged her blindly up the last three steps and through the door into the white-walled high-ceiled sunny room.

"Nice, isn't it?" said Ames.

She started toward him but a table was between them, and a wicker armchair, and to go around them, to seek him out, to clutch his arm, would look strange and desperate. The room was enormous, the whole top floor with only a small part partitioned off with beaver board. It was bare; no rug, no pictures, no curtains at the big windows; only the table and the wicker chair, a bookcase, one straight chair, and an old roll-top desk.

We hadn't much furniture, either, she thought painfully. We didn't need much. We had each other. We had the view.

"It was a storeroom first," said Ames, "and then Mother thought we should have a game room and cleared it out and had the walls plastered, but one party was all we ever gave up here. It's right over the bedroom where she and Dad slept, and one party over his head was enough for Dad. Serena came to live with us soon after that, and I gave her my bedroom and moved up here. It's torrid in summer and there's no way to heat it in winter. The heat rises from

the rest of the house, but the windows are so big and loose that the wind comes right in. How do you stand it up here in winter, Charles?"

"I sleep in the little bedroom the year round," said Charles, "and in winter I close this off."

"You ought to move your bed out beside these windows in the hot weather," said Ames. "That's what I did till the things that Mother saved overflowed the little storeroom and encroached on my kingdom. You're fortunate to live with a woman who doesn't hoard rubbish, Charles. It means you have a whole suite to yourself up here, a place to escape to from domesticity. Livy, come over and look at this view."

She was thankful for the excuse to move close to him, but the sweep of sky beyond the unscreened windows dazzled her and hurt her eyes. Blue sky and green clustering leaves. No black river, no headlights of cars in the night moving along the boulevard like jewels sliding along an invisible thread.

"I got a mighty thrashing once," said Ames, "for standing up here and trying to spit on the top of Mrs. Prout's head while she hung out the washing."

The sight of the clotheslines stretched across the brick-paved yard brought her back to reality. The sight of the dark oblong of vegetable garden with its green shoots that would turn into carrots and beets and lettuce was wonderfully reassuring. What could be more stable, more completely domestic?

She turned from the windows and looked squarely at Carl. At Charles. He wasn't the Carl she had seen waiting for her at the top of the stairs. She had been deceived by a trick of the light behind him. He was Celeste Brittain's husband Charles, thirty-four, happily married, the father of two little girls.

"You ought to be very happy, Charles."

She said it boldly. The attack direct. The name she had never used came easily to her tongue.

His expression did not alter. The slight hauteur was only an effect, the way his dark eyebrows arched. The narrowness that made his blue eyes indolent and bored was only an effect, caused by the fullness of his upper and lower eyelids.

"I ought to be, certainly."

Was his half-smile really supercilious? Or was it a habit of holding his lips compressed, pretending to mock himself and others?

"You have what most people want and never get, Charles. A happy marriage, healthy children, a house with the whole top floor reserved for you, a pleasant town in which to live and earn a living. Privacy and security and peace."

She couldn't say love while that smile was on his lips. It might be authentic mockery, and she wouldn't allow him to mock at love.

They had loved each other deeply. They had both got over it. He was happily married to Celeste and in a month she herself would be married to Ames. What did it matter that he and she had known and loved each other? It was over and done with. Meeting again unexpectedly had been painful but it needn't have been painful if he hadn't gone out of his way to behave peculiarly, refusing to acknowledge her as a friend.

He wasn't being peculiar now. He had got used to the idea of her being here. From now on they could be casual with each other, not friends but the strangers he had at first pretended they were. Strangers could marry into the same family and by degrees become acquainted and after a time could take each other as much for granted as the

chairs and tables in a room. No need to come really close. In-laws weren't the same as blood relations. My husband's sister's husband. No relation to me. No relation by blood or by law or by love.

He said, "You are leaving by the early train tomorrow? Do you go back to New York?"

"To Littlefield, New York," she said. "I shall spend the next few weeks with my father."

"Then," said Ames, "she's coming back here to marry me. You'll bring your father with you, Livy, won't you? It will mean everything to Mother if we're married here, because she can't travel, and you and I don't care where we're married, do we, so long as the knot is firmly tied?"

She said, "We don't care about anything except that," her eyes on his, clinging to his with all her strength because the strength she had came from him. She mustn't waver. She mustn't so much as glance at Charles. She mustn't care about anything except Ames and his love for her and her love for him and their knowledge of each other and the sureness of each other upon which their love rested.

"Congratulate us, Charles," she said, holding to Ames with her eyes. "Please, Charles."

Wasn't he going to say anything to her?

Celeste's voice sounded in the hall below.

"Celeste will be delighted to hear this," said Charles.

Ames went to the door and shouted down to her.

She came in briskly, very neat and sallow in a brown print dress with a beige straw hat that matched her skin too well.

"Daffy won a prize for not being absent or tardy all winter," she said. "That's good for four years old, isn't it? It proves how healthy she is. Not a single cold. The prize is a nice little book about animals. She's on her stomach in the

nursery now, trying to spell out the words. She's going to be as quick as I was, learning to read. She knows all the letters already."

Ames said, "Livvy and I are going to be married, and Mother thinks she and Gracia ought to give us the house to ourselves for the first year."

"Just what I told her when you first built," said his sister promptly. "I'm glad she's being sensible about it, and I'm also very glad that you're marrying Livvy. I'm delighted to have you for a sister, Livvy."

She stood on tiptoe to brush Livvy's cheek with cool dry lips, a touch too impersonal to be called a kiss.

"I was sure it was serious the first time I saw you two together, because Ames was so nervous and excited. It's high time he married. I was thinking it over last night after I went to bed, planning how to rearrange the bedrooms if Mother and Gracia came to live here. Ames, come down to the second floor and I'll show you."

"I don't have to go down," he said impatiently. "I know the second floor as well as you do. I grew up in this house."

"Come down," she repeated. "I want to talk it over with you. Livvy can wait up here. Charles can amuse her."

Don't go, Livvy begged him mutely. Don't leave me.

Celeste waited calmly until he rose from his chair. Livvy thought in wonder, She is the size of a child but she is stronger than a grown man. She doesn't shout and stamp, she doesn't coax and maneuver, she simply says, Do this, and continues to say it, flatly and without fuss, till she wears down the opposition.

"Now this," Livvy heard her say to Ames as they went out and down, "is what I plan to do."

She would do it, too. Nothing could stop her.

Livvy, looking at the doorway through which they had

gone, staring at emptiness, heard Charles say quietly, "But you can't do it," as if he were speaking to his wife who was out of hearing.

He said, "You can't do it, Livy."

He was saying it to her.

19

“You can’t marry him, Livy.”

“I’m going to, Carl.”

They were alone together and the name she knew well was the only name she could call him by. To call him Charles to his face when they were alone would have been as needlessly cruel as what he had said to her in this house on Friday, “We were never friends.”

“Carl, I have to marry him. We love each other. It isn’t a slight attraction. It isn’t a temporary infatuation. I’m old enough to know the real thing and wise enough to value it more than anything on earth. I can’t risk losing it, because I’m twenty-eight and it may not come my way again. I want to marry. I want to have children. Children of love. I wouldn’t marry just to have children and a home. That wouldn’t be good enough for me. I’d rather go lonely for the rest of my life than put up with substitute satisfactions.”

She broke off, uncertain and anxious. What if Celeste and the little girls and this house and this life were substitute satisfactions for him?

“You can’t marry him, Livy.”

“Carl,” she said, “this may be my last chance for real happiness. I’ve missed out twice before. Lately, till I met Ames, I was afraid I’d missed out altogether, that I’d never fall in love like this again and be loved like this in return and have

marriage possible. This kind of lightning can strike more than once in the same place; it's struck three times with me; I doubt very much if it will again, because if I lose out this time, if I have to get over this, I'll be too battered and dull to attract lightning again. I fall in love quickly but I don't get over it quickly."

He had seemed to listen. She thought he had listened and understood what she meant, but whether it had moved him she could not tell. There was no response in his face, no friendliness or compassion. His narrowed eyes were brilliant icy blue, his compressed lips unsmiling.

"You'll get over this quickly, Livy. It isn't so important as you think now. Last night, only a few hours ago, you had made up your mind to go away from here on Monday and not come back. It wasn't important to you then."

"It was," she insisted. "It was fearfully important, but I had given up hope about it. I'd given up hoping that Ames and I could ever come close enough to make peace. What cut us off from each other wasn't just a quarrel. I'd have been angry after a quarrel but I wouldn't have been hopeless. People in love, who have acknowledged their love and come to real closeness and understanding, can quarrel furiously and think they hate each other but they know that when they cool down they can make peace. They can fight and make up time and again. But Ames and I couldn't be sure of making peace because we hadn't acknowledged that we loved each other. We hadn't had time to talk about it and come really close. When I said last night that I was going away on Monday, I thought I'd been fooled in my judgment of Ames and that there was nothing for me to do but get away from him as soon as possible and as far as possible and lick my wounds and set about forgetting him."

"You will forget him, Livy."

"No," she said. "Not now. I don't have to, now. We've talked it all out. We not only love each other but we're sure of each other. Now, if we fight, it won't matter. We can always make up."

"You can't marry him, Livy."

She thought grimly, If he keeps repeating the same thing, so will I. I'll do what his wife does, say the same thing over and over, calmly and positively, until the opposition is hypnotized.

"I'm going to marry him, Carl."

I'll keep on saying it until I'm black in the face, if necessary, or until Celeste and Ames come back upstairs.

She went over and sat in the wicker chair. She started to ask for a cigarette, anything to occupy the time, to make the interview seem casual, but she remembered, with shock and revulsion, how last night in the dark street he had said, "Cigarette, Livy?" and the tiny flame had spurted from his lighter and then he had said, "Look at this."

She had been horribly shaken, not by the sight of the minor deformity which after all was not repellent, but by his attitude toward it, his act of revealing to her something frightful. "The tiniest nick and I was finished. I don't know why they bothered to save the rest of me." Years afterward he could still say that and feel that way about it. Ames had said, "He's morbidly sensitive about it the way some people are about a scar or a disfiguring birthmark."

Morbid. That meant unhealthy. Diseased. I wonder, she thought, if there isn't such a thing as spiritual gangrene.

How skilfully, appearing to be casual, he kept the misshapen hand concealed. She hadn't noticed it until he called her attention to it. To be sure, she watched people's eyes when she talked to them; she didn't look at their hands unless they gesticulated constantly as Mrs. Chelsea did. But

last night she had watched him dancing with his wife. She had been quite near him. Why hadn't she noticed then? Celeste's lace dress must have had some sort of ruffled collar that hung down in the back.

He has the right wife for him, she thought. I couldn't have done for him what she has done. I did love him. I did. But I couldn't have been patient and loving with him if he'd let himself go to pieces before my eyes. A man should survive by his own courage and strength without expecting some woman to put the pieces together again.

Perhaps I really am hard. Perhaps I'm a little cruel. Perhaps Mrs. Chelsea is right in her judgment of me.

"Livy, listen to me."

"I am listening."

"You can't marry Ames Chelsea and settle down with him in a house that is within shouting distance of this house where I live with his sister. The family is too close-knit, the town is too small. Sooner or later everyone knows everyone else's business."

"They know precious little about you."

"I've learned to keep my own counsel," he said. "I've learned to keep myself to myself. I couldn't go on doing that with you constantly near me. Eventually there would be trouble, not only for you and me, but for Ames and his mother and my wife. There's been one disaster in this family already. Do you want to cause another?"

She looked at her folded hands to avoid looking at him. The scratches the cat had left on her wrist were dry dark red ridges. The dark red polish on one thumbnail was chipped.

"So that's what you're afraid of, Carl. Their finding out about us. Well, nobody hates keeping things secret any more than I do. Why don't you tell your wife what there

is to tell about us and I'll tell Ames. I'd rather."

Ames won't like it, she thought miserably. "Of course you've been in love before, but not with anyone I know," that's what he had said. "Not with anyone I'm ever likely to see or have to think about." He meant Rufus, she thought. But he said, "If I ever stop being sure of you, Livy, I'll stop loving you." He said it. He thought he meant it. But how could he know whether he really could stop loving me as easily as all that? It isn't so easy to stop. Or is it, for him? It takes me a long time. But he isn't necessarily like me. Perhaps women, most women, are more stupidly faithful than men. Perhaps it's our peculiar physiology.

He turned against me quickly yesterday. He gave me up. But then we talked things out and the air was cleared.

"I'd rather tell him. I loathe keeping things secret. It makes them more important than they are."

It isn't my having loved before that he'll mind. It's my having loved someone he'll have to see and think about every day, someone right in his own town, his own business, his own family. Not Rufus. But worse than Rufus. Because he knew all there was to know about his brother, and was fond of him, and never blamed him for anything, even taking a girl away from him. But what does he know about Carl? So little that he will keep wondering. Every time I speak to Carl, every time I'm in the same room with him, Ames will watch and wonder, and what will that do to me? It will make me nervous, and when I'm nervous I have accidents. I say and do the wrong things and give a wrong impression of myself.

"Oh, Carl, why didn't you admit at the beginning of the week end that we had known each other before? Keeping silent about it these two days, pretending to be strangers, fooling them all, makes us seem tricky."

Like Serena. Will Ames think I'm a sneak and a liar like her? It was my difference from her that broke down his last resistance last night. I know it was. He thought, Here is one woman too simple and helplessly downright ever to fool me the way Rich was fooled by a woman. I'd better seize her and keep her, whatever her faults.

He won't like finding out that I'm not that simple. Perhaps he'll feel that in keeping silent these two days I've made a fool of him. Even if that doesn't kill his love, he'll begin to wonder about me. Even when I'm alone with him, and Carl isn't with us, he'll wonder about me, and that will make me nervous and I may say and do the wrong things.

"Livy, whether we tell anyone anything or not, we can't both live in this family and in this town."

"And why not?" she cried out. "What is there between us that makes it so impossible? It's nothing more than as if we had made an early and unhappy marriage, like Hank's first one or even like his second, that we'd had to get out of by divorce. That's all it is. But the keeping quiet about it makes it seem more important than it should. It's the secrecy that raises doubts. I used to wonder why a secret marriage was frowned on; now I know; and a secret love affair is worse. There's no knowing whom it may injure or when, even years afterward. Oh, I loathe secrecy."

It was the secrecy that sent me away from you without even waiting to say good-by to you. I left you to keep my family from finding out what might have hurt them deeply; it would have hurt them. But leaving you as I did hurt you. It hurt your self-confidence, didn't it? And it left you frightfully alone.

"I won't have you telling Ames Chelsea anything about me, do you understand, Livy? My life before I came here has nothing to do with the Chelseas. I won't have them won-

dering about me and asking questions.”

So you don't want to be wondered about, either. All right, she thought. I know how you feel. But keeping silent about yourself when you first came here was the real mistake, and that secrecy is injuring me now. You could hardly have foreseen that, could you?

“All right,” she said. “I see now why you treated me like a stranger when you looked into your living room on Friday and saw me there. It would have been embarrassing for you to say to me, ‘Don't tell.’ So you put me in a position where it would embarrass me to claim previous acquaintance with you because you could simply deny it. All right. Having begun that way on Friday, we must go on that way, as strangers. I suppose it's true that we're strangers to each other now. We certainly aren't the two people we were eight years ago. All right. We'll be strangers from this moment, Charles.”

“Don't call me that,” he said.

“What? Charles? But I must. You never had a nickname here. Gracia said that nobody here had known you well enough to give you a nickname.”

That moved her, unexpectedly. It was dreadful, more dreadful than the loss of his hand and his profession, that he should be living without friends, without intimates, keeping everyone at arm's length by that aloofness and faint disdain that had once been a pose but must be authentic now.

“Nobody here,” he said, “has known me at all.”

He was half sitting, half leaning, on the table edge, facing her, his arms folded so that his right hand was hidden by the bend of his elbow. A casual youthful sort of pose. He looked younger than he had yesterday. He looked his right age instead of years older. His pallor looked alive as if the

blood moving under it had some warmth and swiftness. His eyes were almost wide open, for once, the irises brilliant blue, the pupils a little dilated.

He was attractive. If he had no friends, it was because deliberately he held them off.

But he had a wife.

Nobody here, he said, has known me at all. How could he say that when he was happily married?

"But you have a wife."

"Yes," he said. "I have a wife."

She didn't like that little half-smile that was almost supercilious. She hated it.

"You love her, don't you?"

Don't you? Say it. Admit it. Answer me.

"I shall never live with her again," he said. "I have never loved her. I married her because she made up her mind that she wanted me, God knows why, and it didn't make any difference to me what I did or with whom I lived. I haven't cared about anybody or anything for a long time, Livy. Can you understand that? Apathy. It's the next best thing to being dead. It's remarkably peaceful. I had even reached the point of forgetting what it felt like to care about anything or anybody."

She was back in the nightmare and confusion of Friday when she had cried to him wildly, "What are you doing here, Carl? Is anyone sick in this house?"

He was the one. Apathy. The next best thing to being dead. As if death were desirable. That was mental sickness. Never, even in childhood disappointments and adolescent frustrations, had she wished herself dead, even for five minutes, even to escape punishment or mortification or to make someone sorry. Disappointment and frustration had always made her belligerent.

I've had trouble, she thought angrily. Love trouble; and that's as heartbreaking to a woman as a professional smash-up can possibly be to a man. He could have taken up some other branch of medicine. He needn't have thrown away his training. Cutting up patients isn't the only way of curing them.

And he needn't have married Celeste unless he wanted to.

"You must care something for your wife! You've lived five years with her, at least in the house with her. You've had children by her. You must care something for them. You can't be indifferent to your own flesh and blood."

You can't have been unhappy or your wife would have known it and she wouldn't be so complacent as she is.

"Are you trying to frighten me, to drive me away from here, to keep me from marrying Ames? Do you hate me so much as that?"

He stood up, and she leaned forward to rise from her chair so that he wouldn't be talking down to her, which gave him an advantage. But he reached her in two steps and bent to her, his hands grasping the wicker arms of the chair, hemming her in. She jerked back. She didn't want him that close to her. She particularly did not want him to touch her. It was irrational. It was silly. It was an instinctive revulsion of the flesh. She didn't believe for a minute that he was actually insane. She had a healthy person's shrinking from the abnormal, but it wasn't that. She didn't believe he was crazy and she wasn't afraid of him. But she was afraid of something. Of what?

He was at once Carl Brittain and Charles, he was someone she had known well and loved very much, he was someone she didn't know at all and didn't like, he was closer to her even than Ames whom she loved, he was stranger to her than someone she had never set eyes on until this moment.

"Livy, Livy, I don't hate you," his voice was gentle and

warm and alive the way it used to be, very much alive and not indifferent. "How could I hate you? You've made me remember what it was like to be alive and whole and happy. You've made me remember what it was like to be in love. You shouldn't have left me. I lost you and then I lost everything. You should have stayed with me, Livy. Do you remember how happy we were together that winter and summer? Do you remember the summer nights when we used to go up on the roof? Do you remember how black the river was and how beautiful the lights were on the other side of it and how curiously red the sky used to be from the brilliance of the lights?"

She put her hands over her face.

"No. No. I remember nothing. I don't want to remember."

That was what she was afraid of. Remembering with him. Remembering alone was painful but held no danger.

He stepped back from her.

"I don't want to remember, either, Livy."

She dropped her hands. She was free to rise now but she couldn't. The strength had gone out of her as the warmth and aliveness had gone out of his voice.

"You shouldn't have come here, Livy. I didn't want to remember how easy it was to love you, and how lovely. I don't want to love you again, Livy, but I may, if you stay here. That's why you can't stay, do you see now? Not only on my account but on account of others in this family. If you stay, I shall be reminded constantly of what I've lost, and I shall come to hate what I have."

He might come to hate his wife. That's what he meant. He had never loved her and he didn't hate her yet, but he might come to hate her.

"You're asking me to give up Ames. I love him and I may

never love anyone so much again."

He was silent, not even looking at her. He was looking at the treetops and the sweep of blue sky beyond the windows. He had withdrawn from her, cut off by that aloofness that seemed to reject her and everybody and everything. The sense of unbearable intimacy was gone.

If he hated me, she thought, if he wanted to injure me, wantonly, and spoil my happiness simply because he himself has none, I could fight back. I could fight to keep Ames. Eight years ago I would have. I didn't know much at twenty. I thought everybody had a right to happiness. How silly that is. I thought I had a right to take what happiness I wanted. So I took it, and now I can't. Because I took it then, I must give it up now.

He doesn't hate me, she thought. He isn't driving me away from sheer vindictiveness. Perhaps he'd go instead of me, if he could, but he isn't free to; he has a wife and children. I'm the one that's free. I have to be the one to go. It's only just, I suppose. He was here first.

I'll go, she thought. Perhaps Ames will go with me. If he loves me enough, he will. If I tell him the whole clear truth, perhaps he'll be willing to leave the Press to Carl and leave his mother to Celeste, pull up stakes here and go somewhere else with me to start over. But I'll have to tell him the truth. If I don't, he'll think I just don't like his family and his town and the kind of life he leads here. He'll think I haven't the stamina to put up with minor difficulties.

"You'll have to let me tell Ames why I can't live in the same town with you, Carl."

"You will tell him nothing, Livy."

She started up from her chair. She had got back some resistance.

"But I must. You can't expect me to leave him without an

explanation."

He said, "You left me without an explanation."

From the stairs the small clear voice of Daphne came up to them, "What's a mural, Mumma? I want to see a mural."

The voice of her mother, the same sort of clear high voice, answered, "It isn't painted yet, dear, but you can see where it will be."

Celeste was at the door. Daphne pushed past her and ran to Carl, "Daddy, see my little book. It's a prize because I'm so healthy. God gave it to me."

Celeste said, "Charles, I've arranged everything."

She seated herself in the straight-backed chair, her head with its wreath of braids well up, her narrow shoulders well back, her knees together, her small brown oxfords flat on the floor as if she were demonstrating correct sitting posture. She was smiling, her thin lips drawn back, showing her perfect teeth.

"Mother will have my bedroom, since it used to be hers, and she can use the present nursery for a sitting room to receive her own friends so they won't interfere with us, and with Gracia in the guest room they'll have that whole floor to themselves. Mother won't have to climb stairs even once a day. The bathroom is on that floor, and Gracia can take her meals up to her on trays. We'll be two separate families. It's the only way for two families to live in peace under one roof; to keep separate. I shall move up here to your little bedroom, Charles, and make this big room into a nursery. It will be cozy, won't it, the four of us all together up here? You can move your desk into the bedroom and work there just as well in the evenings after the children are asleep."

She wasn't looking at her husband. She was inspecting the room, considering its possibilities. But he was looking at her, and Livy saw hatred in his eyes. Open hatred. It flickered

a moment and then went out and his eyes were blank again and stony blue.

Ames set Phyllis on the floor. He said, "I think it's rotten to make Charles give up his study."

Daphne struck her mother's knee with a doubled-up fist.

"Mumma, why don't you answer me? Where's a mural?"

Celeste pointed to the blank wall opposite.

"It could go there, don't you think so, Livy? I know a boy just finishing high school, very clever; he's Beulah Bailey's nephew; he did all the art work in this year's annual and it was remarkably good, wasn't it, Ames? I wouldn't pay him anything; I'd just furnish the paints; he'd jump at the chance to work on real walls. A circus mural, don't you think? The children are so fond of animals. An elephant, of course; Phyllis adores the plush one she takes to bed; and a zebra, and dancing dogs, and lions and tigers, and clowns, all in bright reds and blues and greens and golds. It will brighten up this bare room. Charles wouldn't let me put in a rug or pictures or even any color. He said it would distract him. But I hate bare white walls and plain dark linoleum; too impersonal. It's too much like a hospital room."

"Look, Mumma, I made a mural," said Daphne, scribbling madly on the white plaster with a stump of pencil.

"Bring me the pencil, dear," said her mother, "and Phyllis, come away from the window."

The baby was hanging over the window sill. Livy gasped and made a lunge, grasping her by the skirt. Ames said, "My God, why can't you watch your offspring, Celeste? In another minute she would have gone out."

"Livy," said Celeste serenely, "when a child is in danger of falling, you should avoid making a sudden movement like that. It's just what causes accidents. Fortunately Phyllis isn't easily startled; she's phlegmatic, like Charles. I'll have bars

put at those windows, of course."

Livy, trembling violently, caught Ames' hand and clung to it.

"I suppose you'll be having a baby as soon as possible, won't you, Livy?" asked Celeste. "It's the sensible thing to do since you're approaching thirty. I mean to have one myself, now that I'm strong again. I shall have Dr. Cheney examine me thoroughly this week. I'm sure my blood count is normal again, and with Mother and Gracia living here and paying rent, I can afford another baby right away."

"You're going to charge them rent?" asked Ames. He turned dark red as if he were strangling.

"Why, of course," said his sister. "They can pay it. Mother has her income from the business and Gracia has her alimony. I won't have to hire another maid, either, because Gracia can take entire charge of Phyllis and Daffy. It will be a joy to her, the poor girl, since she'll never have babies of her own. She isn't likely to marry again after the way Rufus behaved. I'm inclined to blame her, a little, for that catastrophe. A woman with any brains can keep her husband."

She went to Daffy and removed the pencil.

"Come," she said. "I'm sure Roselle has your lunch ready. Auntie Gracia will get lunch for you when she lives here. Livy is going to be your aunty, too, did you know that?"

"No, she isn't," said Daffy, knotting her tiny brows.

"Yes. She's going to marry Uncle Ames and live in the white house with him and be your aunty."

"I won't have her for my aunty!" bellowed Daffy.

"Yes, you will," said her mother.

The child spun round, stamping her foot.

"Daddy! Don't let her marry Uncle Ames! I don't like her! Make her go away from here, Daddy!"

Livy, trembling, pushed past her and ran down the stairs.

20

“PLEASE,” said Gracia. “Please come down, Serena. We’re through dinner and Rich hasn’t come back and Aunt Bethy is fretting about your starving yourself.”

It didn’t seem necessary to add what Aunt Bethy had said about eating for two.

Serena did not budge from the slipper chair. She wasn’t dressed. It was nearly two; she had waked at ten; she was still wearing her nightgown and her long peach-colored dressing gown. Her bare feet were thrust into heelless mules. Her hair was carefully done. So was her face, but powder could not hide the puffiness of her eyes.

“Where is he, Gracia? I won’t stir from this room until he comes up to get me. Why should he stay away this long? Do you think he’s ashamed of getting drunk last night?”

“He wasn’t drunk,” said Gracia.

“He was!” said Serena. “Didn’t you see the color his face was? Didn’t you notice the way he sort of babbled?”

“He talked the same way and he was just as red with excitement the night before at dinner, telling us about the expedition.”

“That was entirely different,” said Serena. “You mightn’t notice the difference, but I know him so well. Besides, it proves he was drunk, the way he talked about leaving me for months and months. Why, he’d cut off his head before he’d

leave me even for a week. Last summer when we had that invitation to go camping, I urged him to go without me because he likes that rough sort of life, but he wouldn't go."

She sprang up and began to pace the floor, her mules slapping the painted wood. The sound annoyed her. She stepped out of the mules and paced the rug in bare feet. Her feet were small and white, broad for their length, the toes very short, the nails varnished to match her rosy fingernails.

"Gracia, last night is the first time Rich and I have ever slept apart. Do you think he came in and turned the light on after I was asleep? Would that stuff you gave me make me sleep so soundly that I wouldn't wake even if Rich came into the room? Oh, I wish you hadn't made me take it. I wish you hadn't taken so much yourself. If you hadn't slept through breakfast you could tell me how he seemed then."

I ought to be sorry for her, Gracia thought. I'm not a bit. I'm not sorry for anyone in the world, even myself. I could tell her he wasn't here for breakfast and it would frighten her more than she's frightened now. I could tell her without a qualm. But it isn't worth making the effort to speak.

"I can't see why he didn't come back for dinner, Gracia. I was certain he would. He never misses meals. I can't help worrying. Do you think having the baby makes me get upset more easily than usual? It's been an awful week end, hasn't it? I've cried so much. I used to have crying spells before I married, mostly when Celeste was hateful, or that Lucile Hallam at school, but I've been too happy to cry since I married Rich."

She pressed her hands lightly against her swollen eyelids.

"If he'll just come back and be sweet, I won't mind anything, even having the baby and getting all out of shape. I'm young enough to get my figure back, don't you think so? It isn't that I'm vain, but Rich loves my looks, and what else

have I got? I'm not terribly intelligent like Celeste or efficient around the house the way you are. I don't want to be. I just want us to go on as we have been the past three years. Only I suppose we can't, with the baby. Oh, I hate to think of meals in the dormitory dining room with all those nasty little boys staring at me and probably tittering. Children have such filthy minds, and they're so inquisitive. I detest them. Perhaps I won't mind my own so much. I shall bring it up better than Celeste is bringing hers up, I can tell you that."

She dropped back into the slipper chair.

"As soon as we get back to the School, Gracia, I'm going straight to Mrs. Upham and tell her about the baby. She's silly about babies and she'll be flattered that I told her before anyone else, and then if anything comes up about Rich being drunk last night in a public bar, she'll use her influence with the Head. He could hardly fire Rich when I'm expecting a baby, could he? It would be too brutal."

Gracia said wearily, "Get into some clothes, Serena, and come downstairs, if only to please Aunt Bethy."

"No," said Serena, thrusting out her lower lip. "I won't go down while that girl is in the house. I won't see her or speak to her again, even to please Aunt Bethy. It's her fault that Rich got drunk. She's dangerous, Gracia. She's man-crazy to such a degree that I don't think she's normal. Most girls get frantic if they haven't caught a husband by the time they're nearing thirty, but she's worse than that. If she just wanted a husband, she'd have concentrated on Ames this week end, wouldn't she? He's the only eligible man in the family. But she's gone after Rich and Charles."

"Charles!" said Gracia.

"Yes, think of it, a stick like Charles Brittain. She dragged him away from the dance last night and they walked around

in the dark for ever so long. And yesterday morning she dragged Rich out to the lake with her; oh, I know you said you suggested it, but I'm sure she put it into your head. And when we came back she dressed in a rush to get downstairs alone with him and play piano duets, of all the juvenile technique, any excuse to get close to him. And then the minute I was out of sight, during the intermission, she dragged him to a bar and made him drunk. Gracia, I think she's a lymphomaniac, that's what I think."

"A what?" said Gracia.

"A lymphomaniac," repeated Serena impressively. "It's something wrong with the lymph glands, I suppose. They work overtime or something, and aren't they mixed up with sex?"

Gracia leaned against the door and laughed. It was a relief to have something to laugh about, but she mustn't give in to it, she knew, because if she let herself go she might laugh all day and all night. She grasped the doorknob. It was cold and hard, a smooth round shape in her fingers. It was reality to cling to. The illusion of having no substance had held over from the night, and it wasn't the drug because that never lasted so long. Could Serena look right through her? Or was Ames the only one for whom she had no substance, the visible shape of a woman but transparent?

She clung to the doorknob, laughing soundlessly. I must get used to his not seeing me, she told herself. I mustn't allow myself to dissolve in thin air just because he's in love and not with me. I must stay real for Aunt Bethy. I'm all she has left, and she's all I have left.

It was a relief, though, to be only a shadow, able to think but unable to feel. Even cutting off the heads of her beautiful iris hadn't hurt at all. She had done it under compulsion to find out whether she couldn't feel sorrow or remorse or at

least reluctance when she slashed at the stems. But she hadn't felt anything. Neither had the iris. Plants don't bleed. Neither do shadows.

"I don't think you should laugh, Gracia. It's terribly serious."

"It will be serious for you," said Gracia abruptly, "if you criticize Livy from now on. Ames is going to marry her."

"Oh, he mustn't!" gasped Serena. "It will kill Aunt Bethy. It will ruin his life. Not that I care about him, but it will kill Aunt Bethy if there's another scandal in the family. A girl like that won't stop chasing men just because she's caught one of her own. This town isn't big enough for her sort, Gracia."

"There won't be any scandal," said Gracia. "She's in love with Ames and she doesn't care a snap of her finger for Rich or Charles or anyone else. She's going to marry Ames a month from now and Aunt Bethy and I are going to live with Celeste because this house isn't big enough for three Mrs. Chelseas."

Serena wailed, "But what about me? I can't come here for the summer if that girl is the head of this house, and I won't stay at Celeste's and have her giving me good advice all the time. I was planning to spend the whole Christmas vacation here, too, in case the baby came early. What shall I do?"

From below Ames shouted, "Serena! Come down here!"

She called back fiercely, "I'm staying right in this room until Rich comes for me."

"Oh, no, you're not, Mrs. Howes," he answered with great distinctness. "Not on your life. Rich won't be back till January."

She heard that last word clearly enough, and she moved. Barefoot, her peach-colored robe flaring out behind her, she

flew down the stairs, and Gracia followed. In the living room Mrs. Chelsea, huddled in a corner of the sofa, held out her arms, and Serena bolted to her. Livy, standing in front of the cold fireplace, her elbows close to her sides, her hands locked before her, looked as if she felt the need of a wall at her back; not fearful, but reluctant, as if she wished no part of this but was inextricably involved against her will.

"Livy," said Ames, "tell her."

"He's gone to join his uncle," said Livy, slowly, carefully, as if the words came hard. "He asked me to tell you. I just happened to be on hand. I was the first down this morning. I usually wake early. He spent the night in the car. He didn't sleep much but he did a lot of thinking. He asked me to tell you that if you still want him with you in January, he'll be here."

There was no outburst from Serena. No tears came into her wide light eyes. She seemed stupefied.

"He wouldn't," she whispered at last. "He wouldn't leave me. We love each other. We have to be together."

"Love isn't the only thing that's important to a man," said Livy.

Ames said, not unkindly, "You drove him to it, Serena. He could have stayed with you of his own free will but after he found out that you'd tried to trap him into staying, he had to go, whether he wanted to or not."

"Don't give way, dearest," Mrs. Chelsea's twisted hands stroked Serena's hair, smoothed her shoulder, patted her cheek. "You mustn't allow yourself to be upset. Think of the baby. Richmond wouldn't have left you if it hadn't been necessary. Husbands have to go away sometimes, soldiers and engineers and men like that. You'll be making lovely plans for the baby. Six months won't seem long."

"Seven months," said Serena sharply. She pushed aside the

nervous caressing hands.

"We'll take care of you, dearest. We'll have a lovely summer together."

"Where?" asked Serena. "You're going to live with Celeste and I won't stay there. She's always lecturing me. I can't stay at the School. I haven't any home but this, and now I can't stay here."

Her eyes blazed suddenly at Ames.

"You'll be sorry for this, Ames Chelsea, bringing that girl into the family, driving your mother and Gracia out of the house, destroying the only home I've had since I was fourteen. You'll be good and sorry."

Gracia thought, I ought to be frightened. I've never seen him so angry. I ought to step between them quickly. I can always quiet him. I ought to, for Aunt Bethy's sake, at least. But it's too much trouble. Let him kill Serena. I don't care.

"Mrs. Howes," he said quite gently, "you invited yourself into this family eleven years ago and Mother let you stay because you were forlorn and she was sore at Uncle Rufe herself for remarrying so soon. She ought to have shipped you back on the next train. You left a perfectly good home and an indulgent father. Why not go back to them now? It will be hard on your stepmother but I daresay she'll put up with you for Uncle Rufe's sake, especially as she'll have you for only a few months instead of eleven years. She'll take excellent care of you, too. She was trained as a nurse. She won't take any nonsense from you."

Serena was on her feet, her face flaming. She drew her dressing gown about her tightly to cover the black chiffon nightgown.

"Maybe you think my father won't take me back, Ames Chelsea! Well, he will. He'll be delighted to have me. I'll prove it to you. I'll go now. I won't spend another hour

under your root."

"Have you train fare?" Ames asked quickly. "It costs a lot to go by train from here to Ohio, and your car is at the School where Rich left it for you, and I can't lend you my car but you're welcome to what cash I can scrape together. The bank isn't open on Sunday, unfortunately, but we'll pass the hat among us. How much cash have you on hand, Mother? Gracia? Livy?"

Serena stamped her foot, realized suddenly that she was slipperless, looked down, dismayed, at her naked white feet with their varnished nails, and rushed from the room in disorder. Mrs. Chelsea struggled to rise.

"Gracia, dearest, help me upstairs. I must go to her."

"I'll carry you, Mother," said Ames.

Her head wavered on her thin old neck. Her little face worked. She wanted to reproach him. She wanted to do without his assistance. She couldn't. She blinked piteously. He gathered her up in his arms and carried her upstairs.

This was the moment that Gracia had meant to avoid. She was left alone with Livy. All the morning she had kept away from her and kept busy. She had filled her time with flowers and filled the house with them. She had made a nuisance of herself in Mrs. Prout's kitchen. She had brought out the little green stepladder to reach down vases from the top shelf of the cupboard, she had got in Mrs. Prout's way at the sink to wash them in soapsuds so that the glass would sparkle; she had dried them painstakingly; she had filled them with iris stalks, arranging the swordlike leaves with infinite care to set off the blossoms. For a wonder Mrs. Prout had made no objection.

The living room was full of flowers, too many of them and all the same.

"You needn't have ruined your garden," said Livy.

She sounded tired and sad. Why should she? What had she done to weary herself? Why wasn't she radiant and triumphant?

"It isn't ruined," said Gracia, "and don't call it my garden. From now on it will be more yours than mine."

"I don't want to dispossess anyone," said Livy. "I don't want to drive anyone away. I don't want to injure anyone."

Gracia stared at her, puzzled.

She isn't talking about Ames' mother, she thought, or about me, either. Neither of us matters to her that much. Of whom is she thinking?

"All I want," said Livy, slowly and painfully, "is to live in peace with people, and I could do it, too, if I were allowed to."

Ames came running down, two stairs at a jump, and tossed a pocketbook into Gracia's lap and flung another at Livy, "Catch! I found them in the bedroom but I couldn't empty them without your leave. I want every penny you've got."

Livy said, "But I shall need carfare myself tomorrow."

So she hadn't bought a round trip ticket. Well, thought Gracia, that didn't mean she had meant to stay on here for life.

She had been invited for the week end, and she was going away tomorrow morning. Perhaps that accounted for her heavy sadness. Parting with Ames. But she was coming back to him in a month.

Was it possible that she felt responsible for the various family troubles that had boiled over during the week end?

It would be strange, thought Gracia, if I had to say to her what she said to me last night, "You have too sensitive a conscience." I had no notion that she was either conscientious or sensitive.

"I'll cash a check for you in the morning, darling," said

Ames, counting bills and silver.

"But the bank won't be open. My train goes at eight."

"You can take a later train. You needn't scruple about being late to your job, since you're giving it up at once."

She was silent.

"This will be enough," said Ames, folding the bills, "with what Mother contributes to the good cause."

"Ames," called his mother, "will you phone for a taxi?"

"I'll drive her to the station, Mother."

"She'd rather have a taxi. Please phone, dearest."

While he telephoned and brought down Serena's luggage, Livy stood silent and Gracia watched her, still puzzled. If Ames was glad to have Serena go, why should Livy fret about it? And if she wasn't fretting about that, what was it?

"Ames."

"Yes, darling?"

He flung himself into a chair, vastly pleased with himself. Perhaps he felt that in dealing sternly with Serena he had justified his manhood, dealt a blow for all men against all conniving women.

"Ames," said Livy, "you don't really care much about the Press, do you? You wanted to go into newspaper work when you finished college, didn't you? That's what you said."

"Oh, that was a whim," he answered lightly, "the result of having edited the campus daily. I got over that notion years ago."

"But you'd be just as contented, wouldn't you, doing some other interesting job in some other town than this?"

His face grew still, his eyes alert.

"Ames, leave the Press to Charles. Let's go away together and leave your family in peace."

"I see I must be practical for both of us, darling. I certainly can't throw over my job just as I'm planning to marry."

You knew I was planning to marry, didn't you? And I have that quaint old conviction that a man should support his wife, if he can."

"Ames, I'm practical," she sounded desperate. She was pleading with him. "I'm adaptable, too. I can turn my hand to almost any sort of job. Let's go into partnership, doing something you think you'd like to do, anywhere you think you'd like to live. Please, Ames."

"I like living here," he said. "I like the Press. You'll like living here, too, with me. Won't you, Livy?"

Gracia looked from one to the other, bewildered. They were talking nonsense, surely, but they weren't talking as if either of them thought it was nonsense. They were terribly in earnest. There was something dangerous about Ames, almost a threat, and something very desperate about Livy.

"Won't you, Livy?"

Gracia found her voice, "Ames, there's the taxi."

She went out to the hall as if she were escaping from something, she didn't know what, and he came and stood beside her to watch his mother and his cousin descend the stairs. Serena, in her green coat, the ribbons of her huge burnt straw hat tied under her chin, kissed Gracia's cheek, gave Ames one bitter glance, and went out with Mrs. Chelsea clinging to her arm.

Ames and Gracia stood in the doorway, watching. Mrs. Chelsea got into the taxi with Serena. Ames turned away.

"I didn't know Mother meant to go to the station with her. I don't like that. They may have quite a wait for the westbound train. Mother will be exhausted."

"The taxi driver will wait and bring her back safely," said Gracia.

"Ames!" said Livy sharply. "Did you hear that? Someone screamed."

"Oh God," he said, "I suppose it's Serena having hysterics all over the cab. I only hope she gets on the train and goes. I'm fed up."

He dropped down on the sofa and whistled.

"What a surprise for Uncle Rufe. He'll be pleased, I expect. He'll be particularly pleased about the grandchild."

Livy was listening, but not to him. She had forgotten him. The tension that had been between them, and the threat, was gone. Her mind had leaped away from him, gone beyond him and out of herself, out of the house. Gracia stared at her, unable to look away. She had never seen anyone listen with such intentness and such dread. Could the heart hear what ears could not?

At the back of the house a door slammed. Two voices rose shrilly and one was Mrs. Prout's.

"Of all the infernal racket," Ames exclaimed. "Who's out there disturbing the peace?"

What peace, Gracia wondered.

"That sounds like Roselle," she said.

The door of the tiny back hall flew open. Mrs. Prout said, "Mr. Ames!"

She had a damp dishtowel in her hands which she kept wrapping around them as if she were drying them and had lost the knack of stopping.

"Mr. Ames, go over to the other house, quick!"

Her mouth hung open a little, as if with fright, but her small black eyes had a glitter that was almost exhilaration.

"There's been a accident, Roselle says. It's bad, she says."

Ames was up, but Livy reached her before he did. Gracia had never seen anyone move so fast.

"How bad?" Livy's hand was on the cook's skinny shoulder, shaking her. "How badly is he hurt?"

Mrs. Prout gaped up at her.

"How'd you know it was him?"

"Is he badly hurt, Mrs. Prout?"

Mrs. Prout, gaping, nodded her head and then shook it.

"He was measuring them top floor windows for bars, Roselle says."

Livy's hands dropped.

"Is he dead?" her voice was shrunken to nothing.

Mrs. Prout nodded.

"Neck's broke," she said importantly.

Livy gave a cry, not loud, but full of such anger and sorrow that the cook stared, "How could he? Oh, how could he?"

"He could do it easy," said Mrs. Prout. "If you knowed that house the way I do, you'd see. I used to be scared of my life washing them great big windows up so high. Anybody could fall out, just as easy as not, and there's all them bricks below."

21

HERE, at last, was something she couldn't run away from, something she couldn't cut loose from and leave behind her. Wherever she went, no matter how far she went, this would go with her. This was what she had tried all her life to elude, and now at last it had caught up with her. Bitter futile regret. If she hadn't come here. If Ames hadn't asked her to marry him. If his mother hadn't disliked her so much that the move to the other house seemed necessary. If the windows hadn't been so wide and so deep. That threat of bars. With bars at the windows of his room, a man felt trapped.

There would have been no need for bars if I hadn't come here.

It all came back to her. It stayed with her. It couldn't be argued away. It couldn't be washed out with weeping. It couldn't be lessened by remembering the hatred in his eyes when he looked at his wife.

He was warped; he might have done it at any time. He married her without love, and at any time he might have begun to hate her. But the time was now. It was I who made him remember. If she could have waited a little. But she wanted another child and a larger nursery with bars at the windows.

She'll grieve but she won't have to blame herself. She wasn't to blame. He didn't have to marry her.

He's free of her, and after she's grieved a while she'll be free, too. But I never will, never, never. I could have left him, as I left him once before, and been free of him at last, and now I never will. Oh, how could he do such a thing to me! How could he? How could he?

The silent room gave her back the cry and the angry protest of it was louder than the grief.

"How could he do such a thing?"

She cried it aloud but Gracia didn't so much as turn her head.

At the front window, seeming to watch the street for the taxi that would bring Ames' mother back from the station, Gracia was seeing nothing but the face of Ames. Ames, whom she loved. Ames, who was still alive. She could hear nothing but the thankfulness that cried aloud in her own mind. It could have happened to him. It could have. It can happen to anyone at any moment. It is happening to young and vigorous men at this moment all over the world. Death, walking. But he is still alive.

He was still alive. He had gone away for a little while but he would come back and she would see his face again and hear his voice. It was all she needed, that he should be in the world with her, alive and vigorous, for her to see and hear once in a while. It was more than she needed, it was pure happiness that once in a while he should see her and be fully aware of her and speak to her.

He had spoken to her before he went to the other house. Only to her. He hadn't looked at Livy. He had had no word for Livy.

"Gracia, look after Mother. Watch for her and put her straight to bed. Don't tell her about this. Not a word. I'll tell her myself tomorrow, when she's had time to recover from Serena. I'll come back as soon as I can. If I need you

over there, I'll send for you."

If I need you.

It was to her that he turned in a time of need. Perhaps he would always turn to her and need her, once in a while, no matter whom he loved and married.

It's wicked to be so happy after what's happened, she thought. No, it isn't. Happiness isn't wicked, ever, any more than being alive is wicked when someone else has died. Last night I wished I might go to sleep and never wake up. That was wicked. I'll never wish it again. I want to be alive as long as he is alive. That's all I want. I wasn't right in my mind last night. I was drugged. I had lost my sense of proportion. But that was all I had lost.

I haven't lost Ames. I haven't lost anything of him that was mine to lose. She has taken nothing from me that was mine, nothing that I needed. I have been wonderfully happy ever since Rufus freed me. I can go on being wonderfully happy for years and years, so long as Ames is alive. I can still see him every day. I can hear his voice. What does it matter if sometimes he looks through me as if I had no substance? Once in a while he may need me and be aware of me.

She left the window and went toward Livy.

"I'm terribly sorry about Charles. I'm terribly sorry for Celeste. But oh, Livy, what if it had been Ames?"

Livy's forehead rested against her hand so that her thick black curls fell forward about her face. Her eyes were hidden by her fingers as if to shut out the light that was in the room.

"It couldn't have been Ames," she said without looking up. "Ames wouldn't have done it."

"It might have been Ames," said Gracia. "It mightn't have happened in that way but it could have happened to him. It can happen to anyone at any time. It is happening to young strong men like Ames all over the world."

Livy, she thought, Livy, we can both love him and he can love us both. Not in the same way. It doesn't have to be in the same way. Our needs are different. You're generous enough to let me keep what little I need of him for my happiness. You never wanted to dispossess me or drive me out of his heart. You wanted only to live in peace with me. You have taken from me nothing that was mine, nothing that I need or desire. I should have lost my happiness by rejecting you. I should have lost it by marrying him. I couldn't go on loving a man with whom I had to live in marriage.

"It couldn't have happened to Ames," said Livy, "because it wasn't an accident. It was on purpose. Oh, how could he do it? He had no right to do it. Nobody has any right to. It's too cruel to the ones who are left alive."

Her voice wasn't loud; it was shrunken and weak; but it was louder than the voice in Gracia's mind.

"Livy! You are not to say that. You are not even to think it. You have no reason to think it. You know nothing about it."

Livy lifted her head and pushed the heavy curls back from her forehead. Her face was exhausted and shrunken like her voice, all color and warmth gone out of it.

"I know all about it. I know because I am involved in it and I shall never be free of it, never. He had no right to do such a thing to me after I told him that I would go. I understood why I had to; why we couldn't both live here, side by side in the same family and the same town; why I had to be the one to go, not only because I had already done him harm enough in coming here at all, and not only because he was here first, but because he wasn't free to go himself; he had a wife and children."

She lifted the back of a hand to her lips. Her hand was

trembling when she dropped it again but her mouth was steady.

"He did go, though, in spite of his wife and children, or maybe because of them. Because he hated his wife."

"He didn't hate her," said Gracia. "I have seen them almost daily since she married him. Five years. If he had hated her, I would have seen it."

"This morning he hated her," said Livy. "I saw it flare up in his eyes. Perhaps I was looking for it, afraid of seeing it, because he had told me he might come to hate her if I stayed here, but I meant to go, and I didn't think it would come so soon."

"What did it have to do with you?" Gracia asked very quietly.

"It wasn't that he loved me," said Livy. "He had got over loving me a long time ago. He had got over caring about anybody or anything. But when I turned up again I made him remember what he had lost; not me, myself; not love, merely; but all that part of his life to which I had belonged; the good part. I made him remember what he himself used to be like and what it felt like to be warm and whole and alive again; he had made himself forget all that; and I turned up and reminded him. That's why he told me I couldn't marry Ames and stay on here, and I understood, finally, why I couldn't; and I told him I'd go."

A look of terror came into her eyes.

"I did tell him, didn't I? Didn't I?"

She wasn't asking Gracia. She was asking herself in a sudden panic of fear.

"The last thing I said to him was that he couldn't expect me to leave Ames without an explanation. And he said, he said," her eyes looked wildly into Gracia's, "he said, 'You

left me without an explanation.' ”

Gracia stepped back from her.

Help me, thought Livy humbly, beseeching her. Tell me he must have understood that I meant to go, with or without an explanation to Ames. Reassure me. I shall never be able to reassure myself.

Garcia's pale face was carved out of stone. Her eyes were gray stone.

Are you my enemy or my friend? asked Livy mutely. If there is any kindness in you, reassure me.

Gracia said nothing.

She is my enemy. She knows as much about me now as I found out about her last night. She wants to be rid of me forever because I know too much about her, and I have given her the sword with which she can drive me away. I put the sword into her hand and closed her fingers strongly about it.

But it doesn't take a sword to murder love and change it, in a moment, to revulsion.

He will never touch me again when he knows. He will be fair. He won't blame me for what nobody could help. He won't think I drove Carl to his death. He won't even let me think so. He will give me the reassurance that she refuses to give me. He will be more than just; he will be generous and kind. But he will never love me again.

I could have left him of my own free will and he might have followed me. He might have loved me enough for that. But now I must leave him, not of my own will and not of his, either, but because of Carl's will.

“How could he be so merciless!” she cried. “How could he be so vindictive!”

She stopped short.

“But he wasn't,” she said. “He wasn't like that at all. He

only pretended to be hard. He was really gentle and tender. Even this morning he didn't hate me. He hated his wife, but he was kind enough to her to make his death look like an accident. If he could be as kind as that to someone he hated, he wouldn't be cruel to me. I'm sure he wouldn't."

Gracia was thinking, Livy and Charles. Why didn't I realize it before? She called him Carl. She knew him well enough to call him by a nickname. She knew him better than any of us have known him, even his wife.

"Did you love him, Livy?"

"Yes. I loved him so much that it took me four years to get over loving him. He loved me very much, too. So I know he wouldn't be merciless to me. He wouldn't mean to injure me any more than I meant to injure him."

She needn't have told me, thought Gracia. She needn't have told anyone, even Ames, least of all Ames. Doesn't she know what such knowledge will do to his love for her? Doesn't she realize that now, if I choose, I can cut her away from Ames and drive her out of his life as surely as if I held a sword in my hand?

"You pretended that you and Charles were strangers. You let all of us think that you had never met him before this week end."

"Because he wouldn't acknowledge me as a friend. I saw him alone on Friday afternoon and called him by name and he looked me in the face and said I was mistaken, that we had never been friends. What could I do? Could I cry out to all of you, 'Once we were lovers?' He would have said, 'She is mistaken. Perhaps I remind her of someone she used to know.' He would have said that. How could I tell what he was unwilling to tell when it concerned him as much as it did me?"

"Last night when you came upstairs with Ames," said

Gracia, "you meant to marry him and live here with him in the same family with Charles, a stone's throw from the house where Charles was living married to Ames' own sister."

"Yes," said Livy steadily. "Yes, I meant to. I thought I could. You went on living with Rufus when you didn't love him," but she couldn't finish what she had been about to say, "in the same house with Rufus' own brother, whom you loved."

She didn't have to say the rest of it. It said itself in Gracia's mind, and more. I should have left Rufus when I stopped loving him, said the voice in Gracia's mind. I should have left him when I began loving Ames. But I didn't go. I didn't have the courage.

"You told Charles that he couldn't expect you to leave Ames without an explanation? But you meant to go, with or without an explanation? You asked Ames this afternoon, before me, if he wouldn't give up the Press and go somewhere with you away from here. You knew by the way he answered you that he wouldn't, didn't you?"

"Yes," said Livy.

"But he might have if you had explained why you had to go. You would have explained to him, wouldn't you, after I had left you alone with him?"

"I couldn't have," said Livy. "Carl hadn't given me permission to tell him."

"Then you would have left Ames, anyway?" cried Gracia with such violence that Livy jerked back. "You would have let him think you didn't love him enough to put up with the kind of life he has here? You cruel selfish fool! How could you do a thing like that to him if you love him? You had consideration for Charles, whom you didn't love; you thought about him; you thought about yourself; why couldn't you think a little about Ames?"

"But I did," said Livy faintly. "I do."

She was confused by the unexpectedness of Gracia's attack and cowed by the passion of it. She had been prepared for denunciation but the emphasis of this denunciation was in an unexpected place.

Her face was hot and dry. The weight of her hair dragged at her head. She thought of her mother's blinding headaches. Why should she think about her mother now? Because she was being scolded and she had often been confused by her mother's scoldings because the emphasis had seemed to be in the wrong place. Her mother's values hadn't been hers. An adult's were never the same as a child's.

But I'm not a child any more, she thought, and Gracia is only a year older than I am. We ought to have the same values. We both love Ames. That ought to make understanding easy.

"You're not thinking of Ames," Gracia's face wasn't stone any more. There was hot color in the hollows of her cheeks and streaking her throat. She looked taller than Livy had thought she could. There was more substance to her. "You're thinking of yourself and you're thinking of Charles, and it's no use thinking about Charles now. He's dead. There's nothing that anyone can do for him or to him any more. There's nothing that he can do."

"Oh, yes," said Livy. "He can kill Ames' love for me. At first I thought he had planned that. But now I don't believe he did. I don't believe he was thinking of me at all. I think he had to get away, not from me, perhaps not even from his wife. From himself."

"You're still thinking of him," said Gracia, "and not of Ames. Charles is dead, but Ames is alive and you might have a little consideration for him, if you love him."

"I do love him. I do have consideration for him. I can give

him a full explanation now. Carl won't care now what I tell Ames. Nothing I say now can injure Carl."

"But it can injure Ames," said Gracia. "Because you know things about Charles Brittain that nobody else knows and because your knowledge is a burden to you, you want to share it with Ames. It would ease your mind a little, wouldn't it? But what about him? Why should you drag him into it? It doesn't concern him. If you are involved with Charles, Ames is involved with you. If you choose, fantastically, to feel responsible for Charles' death simply because you came here for the week end, why shouldn't Ames be equally fantastic and choose to feel responsible, also, simply because he invited you here and asked you to marry him and stay here for the rest of your life? Why should Ames be required to share the burden of your knowledge? What is his crime? Loving you? Is loving a crime any more than ceasing to love?"

Not my enemy, thought Livy in wonder. Not my friend. There is kindness in you but it is all for Ames. I am nothing to you except as a possible part of his happiness or a possible threat to his peace of mind. Carl's death is nothing to you except to make you thankful that Ames is alive.

"You are to say nothing about this to Ames," said Gracia. "You are to say nothing in this house or in this town about the possibility of suicide. Isn't accidental and violent death enough of a disaster? How can you prove it was suicide? No one can prove it. You don't yourself know that it was."

The back door slammed, and Livy started, shaken by unreasonable dread, half expecting to hear again shrill voices that announced disaster.

"I suppose it will be days," said Gracia calmly, "before we can hear that door slam without apprehension."

Ames called, "Gracia? Livy? Where are you?"

He had called out in the same way, in almost the same words, when he had first brought Livy to this house. How long ago? Years ago. Centuries ago. Day before yesterday. Friday afternoon.

He came in, panting a little as if he had run all the way from the other house. His face was white and drawn. His eyes went quickly from Livy to Gracia and back to Livy with relief, as if he had come in great haste to escape from something.

"Where's Mother?"

"She isn't back yet," said Gracia. "I looked up the time table and there isn't a westbound train until ten of five. She's waiting to put Serena on it. Don't worry about her. Don't worry about anything, Ames."

He sank to the floor beside Livy and rested his head against her knees.

"I've had all I can take for a while. Gracia, you'll have to tell Mother. I can't do it. I wish she didn't have to know at all. She'll think right away that it might have been one of the children or that it might have been any one of us while we were living in that house."

"It might have been you," said Gracia. "You slept on that top floor. It might have been you."

"Mother will never have an easy moment, now, so long as any of us live in that house. We'll have to get Celeste and the children out of it, Gracia. We'll have to move them into a smaller house. You and Mother will have to stay on here, of course, with us."

With us.

Livy looked at Gracia. Gracia looked back at her.

"You won't mind too much having us here with you, will you, Livy?" Gracia put it in the form of a question, but Livy knew it wasn't a question. It was a positive statement.

"It was Aunt Bethy's idea that we should move, out of consideration to you and Ames. But now, of course, everything is changed."

Yes, thought Livy. Now, of course, everything is changed. And how do I know what I ought to do? You will have to tell me what to do. You want me to think of Ames, only of Ames, as you do. You know him better than I. You love him, not better than I, but differently. You must tell me what to do. But how do I know whether or not I can do it?

"We can live in peace together, all of us," said Gracia steadily, "can't we? If we are very careful and considerate?"

You love him, Livy thought. Are you giving him to me, when you love him? How can you do that? You couldn't do it if you loved him as I do and if you wanted to marry him yourself and live with him. That can't be what you want. It can't be the way you love him. I suppose we can both love him, if we don't love him in the same way. Then I won't be taking from you anything that is yours to give. You can't give me what is already mine.

"Livy," said Ames, his cheek pressing against her knee, "we can, can't we?"

If we are very careful.

He wasn't really asking her any more than Gracia had asked her. They were both telling her what to do. The only questions were in her mind.

If we are very careful.

You mean, if I am very careful. How can I be, even if I want to? I have never learned how to be. Can I learn, if I want to very much and try very hard, can I learn to think, always, before I speak out, to keep silent at the right times about the right things? Can I learn to walk softly all the days of my life?

It was what he had asked of her at the beginning of the week end. To go easy. It had sounded simple enough. It was what she had told herself on the train, coming to him. To hold everything. How easy it had been to caution herself when she hadn't the faintest conception of what such a warning meant.

She knew now what it meant.

"Livy," he said. He raised himself, turning to her, so that he knelt beside her and rested heavily against her. He locked his hands behind her waist and pressed his face into her breast. He must have felt the hard and painful beat of her heart against his face. "Livy, don't go away tomorrow. Don't ever go away. There isn't any reason why you should, is there?"

Isn't there?

She held him to her, closely, but across his head she looked into Gracia's eyes.

Isn't there any reason why I should go away? Tell me.

"I want you with me, Livy," his voice was muffled in her breast. "I want you now. If you went away, even for a month, something might happen. You might not come back. Things do happen, Livy. I'm frightened by what I've seen today. Don't leave me."

Panic rose up in her. Was she to be allowed no respite? Not even a moment for questioning and regret and grief?

It's too much to expect of me, she thought. I'm not ready to begin being careful. I'm confused. I need time to myself, by myself, away from here, away from him. How can I think clearly when his head is against my heart?

But I've had my respite. I've had my grief and my regret. I've asked questions and found no answers in myself. I've thought of Carl and of myself, and I mustn't do that any

more. It's no use thinking about Carl now. She told me that. There's nothing that anyone can do for him or to him any more.

I must think only of Ames. My love.

"Livy," said Gracia, "you can stay, can't you? You will, won't you?"

Can I? Must I? May I? You aren't asking me. You are telling me what to do.

Yes. I will stay.

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY



126 852

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY